RANCHING FOR SYLVIA

HAROLD BINDLOSS

RANCHING FOR SYLVIA

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

ALTON OF SOMASCO
LORIMER OF THE NORTHWEST
THURSTON OF ORCHARD VALLEY
WINSTON OF THE PRAIRIE
THE GOLD TRAIL
SYDNEY CARTERET
A PRAIRIE COURTSHIP
VANE OF THE TIMBERLANDS
THE LONG PORTAGE
THE DUST OF CONFLICT
THE GREATER POWER
MASTERS OF THE WHEATLANDS
DELILAH OF THE SNOWS
BY RIGHT OF PURCHASE
THE CATTLE BARON'S DAUGHTER
THRICE ARMED
FOR JACINTA

RANCHING FOR SYLVIA

BY

HAROLD BINDLOSS

AUTHOR OF

"VANE OF THE TIMBERLANDS," "WINSTON OF THE PRAIRIE," "THE LONG PORTAGE," ETC.



TORONTO

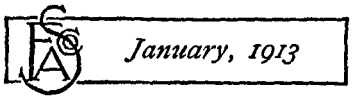
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CHAPTER I

A STRONG APPEAL

IT was evening of early summer. George Lansing sat by a window of the library at Brantholme. The house belonged to his cousin; and George, having lately reached it after traveling in haste from Norway, awaited the coming of Mrs. Sylvia Marston in an eagerly expectant mood. It was characteristic of him that his expression conveyed little hint of his feelings, for George was a quiet, self-contained man; but he had not been so troubled by confused emotions since Sylvia married Marston three years earlier. Marston had taken her to Canada; but now he was dead, and Sylvia, returning to England, had summoned George, who had been appointed executor of her husband's will.

Outside, beyond the broad sweep of lawn, the quiet English countryside lay bathed in the evening light: a river gleaming in the foreground, woods clothed in freshest verdure, and rugged hills running back through gradations of softening color into the distance. Inside, a ray of sunlight stretched across the polished floor, and gleams of brightness rested on the rows of books and somber paneling. Brantholme was

old, but modern art had added comfort and toned down its austerity; and George, fresh from the northern snow peaks, was conscious of its restful atmosphere.

In the meanwhile, he was listening for a footstep. Sylvia, he had been told, would be with him in two or three minutes; he had already been expecting her for a quarter of an hour. This, however, did not surprise him: Sylvia was rarely punctual, and until she married Marston, he had been accustomed to await her pleasure.

She came at length, clad in a thin black dress that fitted her perfectly; and he rose and stood looking at her while his heart beat fast. Sylvia was slight of figure, but curiously graceful, and her normal expression was one of innocent candor. The somber garments emphasized the colorless purity of her complexion; her hair was fair, and she had large, pathetic blue eyes. Her beauty was somehow heightened by a hint of fragility: in her widow's dress she looked very forlorn and helpless; and the man yearned to comfort and protect her. It did not strike him that she had stood for some moments enduring his compassionate scrutiny with exemplary patience.

"It's so nice to see you, George," she said. "I knew you would come."

He thrilled at the assurance; but he was not an effusive person. He brought a chair for her.

"I started as soon as I got your note," he answered simply. "I'm glad you're back again."

He did not think it worth while to mention that he had with difficulty crossed a snow-barred pass in order to save time, and had left a companion, who resented his desertion, in the wilds; but Sylvia guessed that he

had spared no effort, and she answered him with a smile.

"Your welcome's worth having, because it's sincere."

Those who understood Sylvia best occasionally said that when she was unusually gracious it was a sign that she wanted something; but George would have denied this with indignation.

"If it wouldn't be too painful, you might tell me a little about your stay in Canada," he said by and by. "You never wrote, and"—he hesitated—"I heard only once from Dick."

Dick was her dead husband's name, and she sat silent a few moments musing, and glancing unobtrusively at George. He had not changed much since she last saw him, on her wedding-day, though he looked a little older, and rather more serious. There were faint signs of weariness which she did not remember in his sunburned face. On the whole, however, it was a reposeful face, with something in it that suggested a steadfast disposition. His gray eyes met one calmly and directly; his brown hair was short and stiff; the set of his lips and the contour of his jaw were firm. George had entered on his thirtieth year. Though he was strongly made, his appearance was in no way striking, and it was seldom that his conversation was characterized by brilliancy. But his friends trusted him.

"It's difficult to speak of," Sylvia began. "When, soon after our wedding, Dick lost most of his money, and said that we must go to Canada, I felt almost crushed; but I thought he was right." She paused and glanced at George. "He told me what you

wished to do, and I'm glad that, generous as you are, he wouldn't hear of it."

George looked embarrassed.

"I felt his refusal a little," he said. "I could have spared the money, and I was a friend of his."

He had proved a staunch friend, though he had been hardly tried. For several years he had been Sylvia's devoted servant, and an admirer of the more accomplished Marston. When the girl chose the latter it was a cruel blow to George, for he had never regarded his comrade as a possible rival; but after a few weeks of passionate bitterness, he had quietly acquiesced. He had endeavored to blame neither; though there were some who did not hold Sylvia guiltless. George was, as she well knew, her faithful servant still; and this was largely why she meant to tell him her tragic story.

"Well," she said, "when I first went out to the prairie, I was almost appalled. Everything was so crude and barbarous — but you know the country."

George merely nodded. He had spent a few years in a wheat-growing settlement, inhabited by well-bred young Englishmen. The colony, however, was not conducted on economic lines; and when it came to grief, George, having come into some property on the death of a relative, returned to England.

"Still," continued Sylvia, "I tried to be content, and blamed myself when I found it difficult. There was always so much to do — cooking, washing, baking — one could seldom get any help. I often felt worn out and longed to lie down and sleep."

"I can understand that," said George, with grave sympathy. "It's a very hard country for a woman."

He was troubled by the thought of what she must have borne for it was difficult to imagine Sylvia engaged in laborious domestic toil. It had never occurred to him that her delicate appearance was deceptive.

"Dick," she went on, "was out at work all day; there was nobody to talk to — our nearest neighbor lived some miles off. I think now that Dick was hardly strong enough for his task. He got restless and moody after he lost his first crop by frost. During that long, cruel winter we were both unhappy: I never think without a shudder of the bitter nights we spent sitting beside the stove, silent and anxious about the future. But we persevered; the next harvest was good, and we were brighter when winter set in. I shall always be glad of that in view of what came after." She paused, and added in a lower voice: "You heard, of course?"

"Very little; I was away. It was a heavy blow."

"I couldn't write much," explained Sylvia. "Even now, I can hardly talk of it — but you were a dear friend of Dick's. We had to burn wood; the nearest bluff where it could be cut was several miles away; and Dick didn't keep a hired man through the winter. It was often very cold, and I got frightened when he drove off if there was any wind. It was trying to wait in the quiet house, wondering if he could stand the exposure. Then one day something kept him so that he couldn't start for the bluff until noon; and near dusk the wind got up and the snow began to fall. It got thicker, and I could not sit still. I went out now and then and called, and was driven back, almost frozen, by the storm. I could scarcely see the lights

a few yards away; the house shook. The memory of that awful night will haunt me all my life!"

She broke off with a shiver, and George looked very compassionate.

"I think," he said gently, "you had better not go on."

"Ah!" replied Sylvia, "I must grapple with the horror and not yield to it; with the future to be faced, I can't be a coward. At last I heard the team and opened the door. The snow was blinding, but I could dimly see the horses standing in it. I called, but Dick didn't answer, and I ran out and found him lying upon the load of logs. He was very still, and made no sign, but I reached up and shook him — I couldn't believe the dreadful thing. I think I screamed; the team started suddenly, and Dick fell at my feet. Then the truth was clear to me."

A half-choked sob broke from her, but she went on.

"I couldn't move him; I must have gone nearly mad, for I tried to run to Peterson's, three miles away. The snow blinded me, and I came back again; and by and by another team arrived. Peterson had got lost driving home from the settlement. After that, I can't remember anything; I'm thankful it is so — I couldn't bear it!"

Then there was silence for a few moments until George rose and gently laid his hand on her shoulder.

"My sympathy's not worth much, Sylvia, but it's yours," he said. "Can I help in any practical way?"

Growing calmer, she glanced up at him with tearful eyes.

"I can't tell you just yet; but it's a comfort to

have your sympathy. Don't speak to me for a little while, please."

He went back to his place and watched her with a yearning heart, longing for the power to soothe her. She looked so forlorn and desolate, too frail to bear her load of sorrow.

"I must try to be brave," she smiled up at him at length. "And you are my trustee. Please bring those papers I laid down. I suppose I must talk to you about the farm."

It did not strike George that this was a rather sudden change, or that there was anything incongruous in Sylvia's considering her material interests in the midst of her grief. After examining the documents, he asked her a few questions, to which she gave explicit answers.

"Now you should be able to decide what must be done," she said finally; "and I'm anxious about it. I suppose that's natural."

"You have plenty of friends," George reminded her consolingly.

Sylvia rose, and there was bitterness in her expression.

"Friends? Oh, yes; but I've come back to them a widow, badly provided for — that's why I spent some months in Montreal before I could nerve myself to face them." Then her voice softened as she fixed her eyes on him. "It's fortunate there are one or two I can rely on."

Sylvia left him with two clear impressions: her helplessness, and the fact that she trusted him. While he sat turning over the papers, his cousin and co-trustee came in. Herbert Lansing was a middle-aged

business man, and he was inclined to portliness. His clean-shaven and rather fleshy face usually wore a good-humored expression; his manners were easy and, as a rule, genial.

"We must have a talk," he began, indicating the documents in George's hand. "I suppose you have grasped the position, even if Sylvia hasn't explained it. She shows an excellent knowledge of details."

There was a hint of dryness in his tone that escaped George's notice.

"So far as I can make out," he answered, "Dick owned a section of a second-class wheat-land, with a mortgage on the last quarter, some way back from a railroad. The part under cultivation gives a poor crop."

"What would you value the property at?"

George made a rough calculation.

"I expected something of the kind," Herbert told him. "It's all Sylvia has to live upon, and the interest would hardly cover her dressmaker's bills." He looked directly at his cousin. "Of course, it's possible that she will marry again."

"She must never be forced to contemplate it by any dread of poverty," George said shortly.

"How is it to be prevented?"

George merely looked thoughtful and a little stern. Getting no answer, Herbert went on:

"So far as I can see, we have only two courses to choose between. The first is to sell out as soon as we can find a buyer, with unfortunate results if your valuation's right; but the second looks more promising. With immigrants pouring into the country, land's bound to go up, and we ought to get a

largely increased price by holding on a while. To do that, I understand, the land should be worked."

"Yes. It could, no doubt, be improved; which would materially add to its value."

"I see one difficulty: the cost of superintendence might eat up most of the profit. Wages are high on the prairie, are they not?"

George assented, and Herbert continued:

"Then a good deal would depend on the man in charge. Apart from the question of his honesty, he would have to take a thorough interest in the farm."

"He would have to think of nothing else, and be willing to work from sunrise until dark," said George. "Successful farming means determined effort in western Canada."

"Could you put your hands upon a suitable person?"

"I'm very doubtful. You don't often meet with a man of the kind we need in search of an engagement at a strictly moderate salary."

"Then it looks as if we must sell out now for enough to provide Sylvia with a pittance."

"That," George said firmly, "is not to be thought of!"

There was a short silence while he pondered, for his legacy had not proved an unmixed blessing. At first he had found idleness irksome, but by degrees he had grown accustomed to it. Though he was still troubled now and then by an idea that he was wasting his time and making a poor use of such abilities as he possessed, it was pleasant to feel that, within certain limits, he could do exactly as he wished. Life in western Canada was strenuous and somewhat prim-

itive; he was conscious of a strong reluctance to resume it; but he could not bear to have Sylvia, who had luxurious tastes, left almost penniless. There was a way in which he could serve her, and he determined to take it. George was steadfast in his devotion, and did not shrink from a sacrifice.

"It strikes me there's only one suitable plan," he said. "I know something about western farming. I wouldn't need a salary; and Sylvia could trust me to look after her interests. I'd better go out and take charge until things are straightened up, or we come across somebody fit for the post."

Herbert heard him with satisfaction. He had desired to lead George up to this decision, and he suspected that Sylvia had made similar efforts. It was not difficult to instil an idea into his cousin's mind.

"Well," he said thoughtfully, "the suggestion seems a good one; though it's rather hard on you, if you really mean to go."

"That's decided," was the brief answer.

"Then, though we can discuss details later, you had better give me legal authority to look after your affairs while you are away. There are those Kaffir shares, for instance; it might be well to part with them if they go up a point or two."

"I've wondered why you recommended me to buy them," George said bluntly.

Herbert avoided a direct answer. He now and then advised George, who knew little about business, in the management of his property, but his advice was not always disinterested or intended only for his cousin's benefit.

"Oh," he replied, "the cleverest operators now and

then make mistakes, and I don't claim exceptional powers of precision. It's remarkably difficult to forecast the tendency of the stock-market."

George nodded, as if satisfied.

"I'll arrange things before I sail, and I'd better get off as soon as possible. Now, suppose we go down and join the others."

CHAPTER II

HIS FRIENDS' OPINION

ON the afternoon following his arrival, George stood thoughtfully looking about on his cousin's lawn. Creepers flecked the mellow brick front of the old house with sprays of tender leaves; purple clematis hung from a trellis; and lichens tinted the low terrace wall with subdued coloring. The grass was flanked by tall beeches, rising in masses of bright verdure against a sky of clearest blue; and beyond it, across the sparkling river, smooth meadows ran back to the foot of the hills. It was, in spite of the bright sunshine, all so fresh and cool: a picture that could be enjoyed only in rural England.

George was sensible of the appeal it made to him; now, when he must shortly change such scenes for the wide levels of western Canada, which are covered during most of the year with harsh, gray grass, alternately withered by frost and sun, he felt their charm. It was one thing to run across to Norway on a fishing or mountaineering trip and come back when he wished, but quite another to settle down on the prairie where he must remain until his work should be done. Moreover, for Mrs. Lansing had many friends, the figures scattered about the lawn — young men and women in light summer attire — enhanced the attractiveness of the surroundings. They were nice peo-

ple, with pleasant English ways; and George contrasted them with the rather grim, aggressive plainsmen among whom he would presently have to live: men who toiled in the heat, half naked, and who would sit down to meals with him in dusty, unwashed clothes. He was not a sybarite, but he preferred the society of Mrs. Lansing's guests.

After a while she beckoned him, and they leaned upon the terrace wall side by side. She was a good-natured, simple woman, with strongly domestic habits and conventional views.

"I'm glad Herbert has got away from business for a few days," she began. "He works too hard, and it's telling on him. How do you think he is looking?"

George knew she was addicted to displaying a needless anxiety about her husband's health. It had struck him that Herbert was getting stouter; but he now remembered having noticed a hint of care in his face.

"The rest will do him good," he said.

Mrs. Lansing's conversation was often disconnected, and she now changed the subject.

"Herbert tells me you are going to Canada. As you're fond of the open air, you will enjoy it."

"I suppose so," George assented rather dubiously.

"Of course, it's very generous, and Sylvia's fortunate in having you to look after things"—Mrs. Lansing paused before adding—"but are you altogether wise in going, George?"

Lansing knew that his hostess loved romance, and sometimes attempted to assist in one, but he would have preferred another topic.

"I don't see what else I could do," he said.

"That's hardly an answer. You will forgive me for speaking plainly, but what I meant was this — your devotion to Sylvia is not a secret."

"I wish it were!" George retorted. "But I don't intend to deny it."

His companion looked at him reproachfully.

"Don't get restive; I've your best interests at heart. You're a little too confiding and too backward, George. Sylvia slipped through your fingers once before."

George's brown face colored deeply. He was angry, but Mrs. Lansing was not to be deterred.

"Take a hint and stay at home," she went on. "It might pay you better."

"And let Sylvia's property be sacrificed?"

"Yes, if necessary." She looked at him directly. "You have means enough."

He struggled with his indignation. Sylvia hated poverty, and it had been suggested that he should turn the fact to his advantage. The idea that she might be more willing to marry him if she were poor was most unpleasant.

"Sylvia's favor is not to be bought," he said.

Mrs. Lansing's smile was half impatient.

"Oh, well, if you're bent on going, there's nothing to be said. Sylvia, of course, will stay with us."

The arrangement was a natural one, as Sylvia was a relative of hers; but George failed to notice that her expression grew thoughtful as she glanced toward where Sylvia was sitting with a man upon whom the soldier stamp was plainly set. George followed her gaze and frowned, but he said nothing, and his companion presently moved away. Soon afterward he

crossed the lawn and joined a girl who waited for him. Ethel West was tall and strongly made. She was characterized by a keen intelligence and bluntness of speech. Being an old friend of George's, she occasionally assumed the privilege of one.

"I hear you are going to Canada. What is taking you there again?" she asked.

"I am going to look after some farming property, for one thing."

Ethel regarded him with amusement.

"Sylvia Marston's, I suppose?"

"Yes," George answered rather shortly.

"Then what's the other purpose you have in view?"

George hesitated.

"I'm not sure I have another motive."

"So I imagined. You're rather an exceptional man — in some respects."

"If that's true, I wasn't aware of it," George retorted.

Ethel laughed.

"It's hardly worth while to prove my statement; we'll talk of something else. Has Herbert told you anything about his business since you came back? I suppose you have noticed signs of increased prosperity?"

"I'm afraid I'm not observant, and Herbert isn't communicative."

"Perhaps he's wise. Still, the fact that he's putting up a big new orchard-house has some significance. I understand from Stephen that he's been speculating largely in rubber shares. It's a risky game."

"I suppose it is," George agreed. "But it's most

unlikely that Herbert will come to grief. He has a very long head; I believe he could, for example, buy and sell me."

"That wouldn't be very difficult. I suspect Herbert isn't the only one of your acquaintances who is capable of doing as much."

Her eyes followed Sylvia, who was then walking across the grass. Sylvia's movements were always graceful, and she had now a subdued, pensive air that rendered her appearance slightly pathetic. Ethel's face, however, grew quietly scornful. She knew what Sylvia's forlorn and helpless look was worth.

"I'm not afraid that anybody will try," George replied.

"Your confidence is admirable," laughed Ethel; "but I mustn't appear too cynical, and I've a favor to ask. Will you take Edgar out with you?"

George felt a little surprised. Edgar was her brother, a lad of somewhat erratic habits and ideas, who had been at Oxford when George last heard of him.

"Yes, if he wants to go, and Stephen approves," he said; for Stephen, the lawyer, was an elder brother, and the Wests had lost their parents.

"He will be relieved to get him off his hands for a while; but Edgar will be over to see you during the afternoon. He's spending a week or two with the Charltons."

"I remember that young Charlton and he were close acquaintances."

"That was the excuse for the visit; but you had better understand that there was a certain amount of friction when Edgar came home after some trouble

with the authorities. In his opinion, Stephen is too fond of making mountains out of molehills; but I must own that Edgar's molehills have a way of increasing in size, and the last one caused us a good deal of uneasiness. Anyway, we have decided that a year's hard work in Canada might help to steady him, even if he doesn't follow up farming. The main point is that he would be safe with you."

"I'll have a talk with him," George promised; and after a word of thanks Ethel turned away.

A little later she joined Mrs. Lansing, who was sitting alone in the shadow of a beech.

"I'm afraid I've added to George's responsibilities — he has agreed to take Edgar out," she said. "He has some reason for wishing to be delivered from his friends, though I don't suppose he does so."

"I've felt the same thing. Of course, I'm not referring to Edgar — his last scrape was only a trifling matter."

"So he contends," laughed Ethel. "Stephen doesn't agree with him."

"Well," said Mrs. Lansing, "I've often thought it's a pity George didn't marry somebody nice and sensible."

"Would you apply that description to Sylvia?"

"Sylvia stands apart," Mrs. Lansing declared. "She can do what nobody else would venture on, and yet you feel you must excuse her."

"Have you any particular exploit of hers in your mind?"

"I was thinking of when she accepted Dick Marston. I believe even Dick was astonished."

"Sylvia knows how to make herself irresistible,"

said Ethel, strolling away a few moments later, somewhat troubled in mind.

She had cherished a half-tender regard for George, which, had it been reciprocated, might have changed to a deeper feeling. The man was steadfast, chivalrous, honest, and she saw in him latent capabilities which few others suspected. Still, his devotion to Sylvia had never been concealed, and Ethel had acquiesced in the situation, though she retained a strong interest in him. She believed that in going to Canada he was doing an injudicious thing; but as his confidence was hard to shake, he could not be warned — her conversation with him had made that plainer. She would not regret it if Sylvia forgot him while he was absent; but there were other ways in which he might suffer, and she wished he had not chosen to place the management of his affairs in Herbert's hands.

In the meanwhile, her brother had arrived, and he and George were sitting together on the opposite side of the lawn. Edgar was a handsome, dark-haired lad, with a mischievous expression, and he sometimes owned that his capacity for seeing the humorous side of things was a gift that threatened to be his ruin. Nevertheless, there was a vein of sound common sense in him, and he had a strong admiration for George Lansing.

"Why do you want to go with me?" the latter asked, pretending to be a bit stern, but liking the youngster all the while.

"That," Edgar laughed, "is a rather euphemistic way of putting it. My wishes have not been consulted. I must give my relatives the credit for the

idea. Still, one must admit they had some provocation."

"It strikes me they have had a good deal of patience," George said dryly. "I suppose it's exhausted."

"No," replied Edgar, with a confidential air; "it's mine that has given out. I'd better explain that being stuffed with what somebody calls formulæ gets monotonous, and it's a diet they're rather fond of at Oxford. Down here in the country they're almost as bad; and pretending to admire things I don't believe in positively hurts. That's why I sometimes protest, with, as a rule, disastrous results."

"Disastrous to the objectionable ideas or customs?"

"No," laughed the lad; "to me. Have you ever noticed how vindictive narrow-minded people get when you destroy their pet delusions?"

"I can't remember ever having done so."

"Then you'll come to it. If you're honest it's unavoidable; only some people claim that they make the attack from duty, while I find a positive pleasure in the thing."

"There's one consolation — you won't have much time for such proceedings if you come with me. You'll have to work in Canada."

"I anticipated something of the sort," the lad rejoined. Then he grew serious. "Have you decided who's to look after your affairs while you are away? If you haven't, you might do worse than leave them to Stephen. He's steady and safe as a rock, and, after all, the three per cent. you're sure of is better than a handsome dividend you may never get."

"I can't give Herbert the go-by. He's the obvious person to do whatever may be needful."

"I suppose so," Edgar assented, with some reluctance. "No doubt he'd feel hurt if you asked anybody else; but I wish you could have got Stephen."

He changed the subject; and when some of the others came up and joined them, he resumed his humorous manner.

"I'm not asking for sympathy," he said, in answer to one remark. "I'm going out to extend the bounds of the empire, strengthen the ties with the mother country, and that sort of thing. It's one of the privileges that seem to be attached to the possession of a temperament like mine."

"How will you set about the work?" somebody asked.

"With the plow and the land-packer," George broke in. "He'll have the satisfaction of driving them twelve hours a day. It happens to be the most effective way of doing the things he mentions."

Edgar's laughter followed him as he left the group.

After dinner that evening Herbert invited George into the library.

"Parker has come over about my lease, and his visit will save you a journey," he explained. "We may as well get things settled now while he's here."

George went with him to the library, where the lawyer sat at a writing-table. He waited in silence while Herbert gave the lawyer a few instructions. A faint draught flowed in through an open window, and gently stirred the litter of papers; a shaded lamp stood on the table, and its light revealed the faces of

the two men near it with sharp distinctness, though outside the circle of brightness the big room was almost dark.

It struck George that his cousin looked eager, as if he were impatient to get the work finished; but he reflected that this was most likely because Herbert wished to discuss the matter of the lease. Then he remembered with a little irritation what Ethel said during the afternoon. It was not very lucid, but he had an idea that she meant to warn him; and Edgar had gone some length in urging that he should leave the care of his property to another man. This was curious, but hardly to be taken into consideration. Herbert was capable and exact in his dealings; and yet for a moment or two George was troubled by a faint doubt. It appeared irrational, and he drove it out of his mind when Herbert spoke.

"The deed's ready; you have only to sign," he said, indicating a paper. Then he added, with a smile: "You quite realize the importance of what you are doing?"

The lawyer turned to George.

"This document gives Mr. Lansing full authority to dispose of your possessions as he thinks fit. In accordance with it, his signature will be honored as if it were yours."

Parker's expression was severely formal, and his tone businesslike; but he had known George for a long while, and had served his father. Again, for a moment, George had an uneasy feeling that he was being warned; but he had confidence in his friends, and his cousin was eminently reliable.

"I know that," he answered. "I've left matters in Herbert's hands on other occasions, with fortunate results. Will you give me a pen?"

The lawyer watched him sign with an inscrutable face, but when he laid down the pen, Herbert drew back out of the strong light. He was folding the paper with a sense of satisfaction and relief.

CHAPTER III

A MATTER OF DUTY

ON the evening before George's departure, Sylvia stood with him at the entrance to the Brantholme drive. He leaned upon the gate, a broad-shouldered, motionless figure; his eyes fixed moodily upon the prospect, because he was afraid to let them dwell upon his companion. In front, across the dim white road, a cornfield ran down to the river, and on one side of it a wood towered in a shadowy mass against a soft green streak of light. Near its foot the water gleamed palely among overhanging alders, and in the distance the hills faded into the grayness of the eastern sky. Except for the low murmur of the stream, it was very still; and the air was heavy with the smell of dew-damped soil.

All this had its effect on George. He loved the quiet English country; and now, when he must leave it, it strongly called to him. He had congenial friends, and occupations in which he took pleasure — sport, experiments in farming, and stock-raising. It would be hard to drop them; but that, after all, was a minor trouble. He would be separated from Sylvia until his work should be done.

"What a beautiful night!" she said at length.

Summoning his resolution, he turned and looked at her. She stood with one hand resting on the gate,

slender, graceful, and wonderfully attractive, the black dress emphasizing the pure whiteness of her face and hands. Sylvia was an artist where dress was concerned, and she had made the most of her somber garb. As he looked at her a strong temptation shook the man. He might still discover some excuse for remaining to watch over Sylvia, and seize each opportunity for gaining her esteem. Then he remembered that this would entail the sacrifice of her property; and a faint distrust of her, which he had hitherto refused to admit, seized him. Sylvia, threatened by poverty, might yield without affection to the opportunities of a suitor who would bid high enough for her hand; and he would not have such a course forced upon her, even if he were the one to profit.

"You're very quiet; you must feel going away," she said.

"Yes," George admitted; "I feel it a good deal."

"Ah! I don't know anybody else who would have gone — I feel selfish and shabby in letting you."

"I don't think you could stop me."

"I haven't tried. I suppose I'm a coward, but until you promised to look after matters, I was afraid of the future. I have friends, but the tinge of contempt which would creep into their pity would be hard to bear. It's hateful to feel that you are being put up with. Sometimes I thought I'd go back to Canada."

"I've wondered how you stood it as long as you did," George said incautiously.

"Aren't you forgetting? I had Dick with me then." Sylvia paused and shuddered. "It would be so different now."

George felt reproved and very compassionate.

"Yes," he said, "I'm afraid I forgot; but the whole thing seems unreal. It's almost impossible to imagine your living on a farm in western Canada."

"I dare say it's difficult. I'll confess I'm fond of ease and comfort and refinement. I like to be looked after and waited on; to have somebody to keep unpleasant things away. That's dreadfully weak, isn't it? And because I haven't more courage, I'm sending you back to the prairie."

"I'm quite ready to go."

"Oh, I'm sure of that! It's comforting to remember that you're so resolute and matter-of-fact. You wouldn't let troubles daunt you — perhaps you would scarcely notice them when you had made up your mind."

The man smiled, rather wistfully. He could feel things keenly, and he had his romance; but Sylvia resumed:

"I sometimes wonder if you ever felt really badly hurt?"

"Once," he said quietly. "I think I have got over it."

"Ah!" she murmured. "I was afraid you would blame me, but now it seems that Dick knew you better than I did. When he made you my trustee, he said that you were too big to bear him malice."

The blood crept into George's face.

"After the first shock had passed, and I could reason calmly, I don't think I blamed either of you. You had promised me nothing; Dick was a brilliant man, with a charm everybody felt. By comparison, I was merely a plodder."

Sylvia mused for a few moments.

"George," she said presently, "I sometimes think you're a little too diffident. You plodders who go straight on, stopping for nothing, generally gain your object in the end."

His heart beat faster. It looked as if she meant this for a hint.

"I can't thank you properly," she continued; "though I know that all you undertake will be thoroughly carried out. I wish I hadn't been forced to let you go so far away; there is nobody else I can rely on."

He could not tell her that he longed for the right to shelter her always — it was not very long since the Canadian tragedy — but silence cost him an effort. At length she touched his arm.

"It's getting late, and the others will wonder where we are," she reminded him.

They went back to the house; and when Sylvia joined Mrs. Lansing, George felt seriously annoyed with himself. He had been deeply stirred, but he had preserved an unmoved appearance when he might have expressed some sympathy of tenderness which could not have been resented. Presently Ethel West crossed the room to where he was rather moodily standing.

"I believe our car is waiting, and, as Edgar won't let me come to the station to-morrow, I must say good-by now," she told him. "Both Stephen and I are glad he is on your hands."

"I must try to deserve your confidence," George said, smiling. "It's premature yet."

"Never mind that. We're alike in some respects:

pretty speeches don't appeal to us. But there's one thing I must tell you — don't delay out yonder, come back as soon as you can."

She left him thoughtful. He had a high opinion of Ethel's intelligence, but he would entertain no doubts or misgivings. They were treasonable to Herbert and, what was worse, to Sylvia.

Going to bed in good time, he had only a few words with Sylvia over his early breakfast in the morning. Then he was driven to the station, where Edgar joined him; and the greater part of their journey proved uneventful.

Twelve days after leaving Liverpool they were, however, awakened early one morning by feeling the express-train suddenly slacken speed. The big cars shook with a violent jarring, and George hurriedly swung himself down from his upper berth. He had some difficulty in getting into his jacket and putting on his boots, but he pushed through the startled passengers and sprang down upon the track before the train quite stopped. He knew that accidents were not uncommon in the wilds of northern Ontario.

Ragged firs rose, dripping, against the rosy glow in the eastern sky, with the narrow gap, hewed out for the line, running through their midst. Some had been stripped of their smaller branches by fire, and leaned, dead and blackened, athwart each other. Beneath them, shallow pools gleamed in the hollows of the rocks, which rose in rounded masses here and there, and the gravel of the graded track was seamed by water channels. George remembered having heard the roar of heavy rain and a crash of thunder

during the night, but it was now wonderfully still and fresh, and the resinous fragrance of the firs filled the chilly air.

Walking forward, clear of the curious passengers who poured from the cars, he saw a lake running back into the woods. A tall water-tank stood on the margin with a shanty, in which George imagined a telegraph operator was stationed, at its foot. Ahead, the great locomotive was pouring out a cloud of sooty smoke. When George reached it he waited until the engineer had finished talking to a man on the line.

"What are we stopping for? Has anything gone wrong?" he asked.

"Freight locomotive jumped the track at a wash-out some miles ahead," explained the engineer. "Took the fireman with her; but I don't know much about it yet. Guess they'll want me soon."

George got the man to promise to take him, and then he went back until he met Edgar, to whom he related what he had heard.

"I'm not astonished," remarked the lad, indicating one of the sleepers. "Look at that — the rail's only held down by a spike or two; we fasten them in solid chairs. They're rough and ready in this country."

It was the characteristic hypercritical attitude of the newly-arrived Englishman; and George, knowing that the Canadians strongly resent it, noticed a look of interest in the eyes of a girl standing near them. She was, he imagined, about twenty-four years of age, and was dressed in some thin white material, the narrow skirt scarcely reaching to the tops of her remarkably neat shoes. Her arms were uncovered to the elbows; her neck was bare, but this displayed a

beautiful skin; and the face beneath the turned-down brim of the big hat was attractive. George thought she was amused at Edgar's comment.

"Well," he said, "while we put down a few miles of metals they'd drive the track across leagues of new country and make a start with the traffic. They haven't time to be particular, with the great western wheat-land waiting for development."

The girl moved away; and when word went around that there would be a delay of several hours, George sat down beside the lake and watched the Colonist passengers wash their children's clothes. It was, he thought, rather a striking scene — the great train standing in the rugged wilderness, the wide stretch of gleaming water running back among the firs, and the swarm of jaded immigrants splashing bare-footed along the beach. Their harsh voices and hoarse laughter broke discordantly on the silence of the woods.

After a while an elderly man, in badly-fitting clothes and an old wide-brimmed hat, sauntered up with the girl George had noticed, and stopped to survey the passengers.

"A middling sample; not so many English as usual," he remarked. "If they keep on coming in as they're doing, we'll get harvest hands at a reasonable figure."

"All he thinks about!" Edgar commented, in a lowered voice. "That's the uncivil old fellow who smokes the vile leaf tobacco; he drove me out of the car once or twice. It's hard to believe he's her father; but in some ways they're alike."

"I can't help feeling sorry for them," the girl re-

plied. "Look at those worn-out women, almost too limp to move. It's hot and shaky enough in our cars; the Colonist ones must be dreadful."

"Good enough for the folks who're in them; they're not fastidious," said the man.

They strolled on, and George felt mildly curious about them. The girl was pretty and graceful, with a stamp of refinement upon her; the man was essentially rugged and rather grim. Suddenly, however, a whistle blast rang out, and George hurried toward the engine. It was beginning to move when he reached it but, grasping a hand-rail, he clambered up. The cab was already full of passengers, but he had found a place on the frame above the wheels when he saw the girl in the light dress running, flushed and eager, along the line. Leaning down as far as possible, he held out his hand to her.

"Get hold, if you want to come," he called. "There's a step yonder."

She seized his hand and smiled at him when he drew her up beside him.

"Thanks," she said. "I was nearly too late."

"Perhaps we had better make for the pilot, where there'll be more room," George suggested, as two more passengers scrambled up.

They crept forward, holding on by the guard-rail, while the great engine began to rock as it gathered speed. The girl, however, was fearless, and at length they reached the front, and stood beneath the big head-lamp with the triangular frame of the pilot running down to the rails at their feet. The ledge along the top of it was narrow, and when his companion sat down George felt concerned about her safety. Her

hat had blown back, setting free tresses of glossy hair; her light skirt fluttered against the sooty pilot.

"You'll have to allow me," he said, tucking the thin fabric beneath her and passing an arm around her waist.

He thought she bore it well, for her manner was free from prudish alarm or coquettish submission. With sound sense, she had calmly acquiesced in the situation; but George found the latter pleasant. His companion was pretty, the swift motion had brought a fine warmth into her cheeks, and a sparkle into her eyes; and George was slightly vexed when Edgar, appearing round the front of the engine, unnoticed by the girl, surveyed him with a grin.

"Is there room for me?" he asked. "I had to leave the place where I was, because my fellow passengers didn't seem to mind if they pushed me off. A stranger doesn't get much consideration in this country."

The girl looked up at him consideringly and answered, through the roar of the engine:

"You may sit here, if you'll stop criticizing us."

"It's quite fair," Edgar protested, as he took his place by her side. "I've been in Canada only three days, but I've several times heard myself alluded to as an Englishman, as if that were some excuse for me."

"Are you sure you haven't been provoking people by your superior air?"

"I didn't know I possessed one; but I don't see why I should be very humble because I'm in Canada."

The girl laughed good-humoredly, and turned to George.

"I'm glad I came. This is delightful," she said.

It was, George admitted, an exhilarating experience. The big engine was now running at top speed, rocking down the somewhat roughly laid line. Banks of trees and stretches of gleaming water sped past. The rails ahead came flying back to them. The sun was on the firs, and the wind that lashed George's face was filled with their fragrance. Once or twice a tress of his companion's hair blew across his cheek, but she did not appear to notice this. He thought she was conscious of little beyond the thrill of speed.

At length the engine stopped where the line crossed a lake on a high embankment. A long row of freight-cars stood near a break in the track into which the rails ran down, and a faint cloud of steam rose from the gap.

George helped the girl down, anticipating Edgar, who seemed anxious to offer his assistance, and they walked forward until they could see into the pit. It was nearly forty feet in depth, for the embankment, softened by heavy rain, had slipped into the lake. In the bottom a huge locomotive lay shattered and overturned, with half a dozen men toiling about it. The girl stopped with a little gasp, for there was something strangely impressive in the sight of the wreck.

"It's dreadful, isn't it?" she exclaimed.

Then the men who had come with them gathered round.

"Where's the fireman?" one of them asked. "He was too late when he jumped. Have they got him out?"

"Guess not," said another. "See, they're trying to jack up the front of her."

"Aren't you mistaken about the man?" George asked, looking at the first speaker meaningly.

"Why, no," replied the other. "He's certainly pinned down among the wreck. They'll find him before long. Isn't that a jacket sleeve?"

He broke off with an exclamation, as Edgar drove an elbow hard into his ribs; but it was too late. The girl looked around at George, white in face.

"Is there a man beneath the engine? Don't try to put me off."

"I'm afraid it's the case."

"Then why did you bring me?" she cried with a shudder. "Take me away at once!"

George explained that he had forgotten the serious nature of the accident. He hastily helped her up and turned away with her, but when they had gone a little distance she sat down on a boulder.

"I feel badly startled and ashamed," she exclaimed. "I was enjoying it, as a spectacle, and all the time there was a man crushed to death." Then she recovered her composure. "Go back and help. Besides, I think your friend is getting into trouble."

She was right. The man Edgar tried to silence had turned upon him, savage and rather breathless.

"Now," he said, "I'll fix you mighty quick. Think I'm going to have a blamed Percy sticking his elbow into me?"

Edgar glanced at the big and brawny man, with a twinge of somewhat natural uneasiness; but he was not greatly daunted.

"Oh, well," he retorted coolly, "if that's the way you look at it! But if you're not in a desperate hurry, I'll take off my jacket."

"What did you prod him for, anyway?" another asked.

"I'm sorry I didn't jab him twice as hard; though I'd have wasted my energy," Edgar explained. "The fellow has no sense, but that's no reason why he should be allowed to frighten a pretty girl."

His antagonist looked as if a light had suddenly dawned on him.

"Is that why you did it?"

"Of course! Do you think I'd attack a man of nearly twice my weight without some reason?"

The fellow laughed.

"We'll let it go at that. You're all right, Percy. We like you."

"Thanks," said Edgar; "but my name isn't Percy. Couldn't you think of something more stylish for a change?"

They greeted this with hoarse laughter; and George, arriving on the scene, scrambled down into the pit with them to help the men below. It was some time later when he rejoined the girl, who was then gathering berries in the wood. She saw that his face and hands were grimy and his clothes were soiled.

"I heard that you found the unfortunate man. It was very sad," she said. "But what have you been doing since?"

"Shoveling a ton or two of gravel. Then I assisted in jacking up one side of the engine."

"Why? Did you enjoy it?"

George laughed; he had, as it happened, experienced a curious pleasure in the work. He was accustomed to the more vigorous sports; but, after all, they led to no tangible results, and in this respect his re-

cent task was different — one, as he thought of it, could see what one had done. He had been endowed with some ability of strictly practical description, though it had so far escaped development.

"Yes," he responded. "I enjoyed it very much."

The girl regarded him with a trace of curiosity.

"Was that because work of the kind is new to you?"

"No," George answered. "It isn't altogether a novelty. I once spent three years in manual labor; and now when I look back at them, I believe I was happy then."

She nodded as if she understood.

"Shall we walk back?" she suggested.

They went on together, and though the sun was now fiercely hot and the distance long, George enjoyed the walk. Once they met a ballast train, with a steam plow mounted at one end of it, and a crowd of men riding on the open cars; but when it had passed there was nothing to break the deep silence of the woods. The dark firs shut in the narrow track except when here and there a winding lake or frothing river filled a sunny opening.

Soon after George and his companion reached the train, the engine came back with a row of freight-cars, and during the afternoon the western express pulled out again, and sped furiously through the shadowy bush.

CHAPTER IV

GEORGE MAKES FRIENDS

IT was nearing midnight when George walked impatiently up and down the waiting-room in Winnipeg station, for the western express was very late, and nobody seemed to know when it would start. George was nevertheless interested in his surroundings, and with some reason. The great room was built in palatial style, with domed roof, tessellated marble floor, and stately pillars; it was brilliantly lighted; and massively-framed paintings of snow-capped peaks and river gorges adorned the walls. An excursion-train from Winnipeg Beach had just come in, and streams of young men and women in summer attire were passing through the room. They all looked happy and prosperous: he thought the girls' light dresses were gayer and smarter than those usually seen among a crowd of English passengers; but there was another side to the picture.

Rows of artistic seats ran here and there, and each was occupied by jaded immigrants, worn out by their journey in the sweltering Colonist cars. Piles of dilapidated baggage surrounded them, and among it exhausted children lay asleep. Drowsy, dusty women, with careworn faces, were huddled beside them; men bearing the stamp of ill-paid toil sat in dejected apathy; and all about each group the floor, which was

wet with drippings from the roof, was strewn with banana skins, crumbs, and scraps of food. There had been heavy rains, and the atmosphere was hot and humid. It was, however, the silence of these newcomers that struck George most. There was no grumbling among them — they scarcely seemed vigorous enough for that — but as he passed one row he heard a woman's low sobbing and the wail of a fretful child.

After a while the girl he had met on the train appeared and intimated by a smile that he might join her. They found an unoccupied seat, and a smartly-attired young man who was approaching it stopped when he saw them.

"Well," he said coolly, "I guess I won't intrude."

George felt seriously annoyed with him, but he was reassured when his companion laughed with candid amusement. Though there was no doubt of her prettiness, he had already noticed that she did not impress one most forcibly with the fact that she was an attractive young woman. It seemed to sink into the background when one spoke to her.

"It was rather tedious waiting in the hotel," she explained. "There was nobody I could talk to; my father is busy with a grain broker."

"Then he is a farmer?"

"Yes," said the girl, "he has a farm."

"And you live out in the West with him?"

"Of course," she said, smiling. "Still, I have been in Montreal, and England." Then she turned and glanced at the jaded immigrants. "One feels sorry for them; they have so much to bear."

George felt that she wished to change the subject, and he followed her lead.

"I feel inclined to wonder where they all go to and how you employ them. Your people still seem anxious to bring them in."

"Yes," she replied thoughtfully. "It's rather a difficult question. Of course, we pay high wages — people who say they must dispense with help and can't carry out useful projects would like to see them lower — but there's the long winter when, out West at least, very few men can work. Then what the others have earned in summer rapidly melts."

"But what do the Canadian farm-hands and mechanics think? It wouldn't suit them to have wages broken down."

West had come up a few moments earlier.

"It doesn't matter," he laughed; "they won't be consulted. It's the other people who pull the strings, and they're adopting a forward policy — rush them all in; it's their lookout when they get here. That's my opinion; though I'll own that I know remarkably little about western Canada."

"You won't admit he's right," George said to the girl.

She looked grave.

"Sometimes," she answered, "I wonder."

Then she turned to West.

"You don't seem impressed with the country," she said.

"As a rule, I try to be truthful. The country strikes me as being pretty mixed, full of contrasts. There's this place, for instance; one could imagine they had meant to build a Greek temple, and now it looks more like a swimming-bath. After planning

the rest magnificently, why couldn't they put on a roof that wouldn't leak?"

"It has been an exceptionally heavy rain," the girl reminded him.

"Just so. But couldn't somebody get a broom and sweep the water out? Our unimaginative English folk could rise as far as that."

She laughed good-humoredly, and her father sauntered up to them.

"Any news of the train yet?" he asked.

"No, sir," said Edgar. "In my opinion, any attempt to extract reliable information from a Canadian railroad-hand is a waste of time. No doubt, it's so scarce that it hurts them to part with it."

The Westerner looked at him with a little hard smile. He was tall and gaunt and dressed in baggy clothes, but there was a hint of power in his face, which was lined, and deeply bronzed by exposure to the weather.

"Well," he retorted, "what do you expect, Percy, if you talk to them like that? But I want to thank you and your partner for taking care of my girl when she went to see the wreck. Fellow on the cars told me — said you were a gritty pup!"

Edgar looked confused, but the man drew an old skin bag out of his pocket.

"It's domestic leaf; take a smoke."

"No, thanks," said Edgar quickly. "I've no doubt it's excellent, but I really prefer the common Virginia stuff."

"Matter of habit," replied the other. "I don't carry cigars; they're expensive. Going far West?"

"We get off at Sage Butte."

"It's called Butte. I'm located in that district."

"Then I wonder if you knew an Englishman named Marston?" George interposed.

"I certainly did; he died last winter. Oughtn't to have come out farming; he hadn't the grip."

George felt surprised. He had always admired Marston, who had excelled in whatever he took in hand. It was strange and disconcerting to hear him disparaged.

"Will you tell me what you mean by that?" he asked.

"Why, yes. I've nothing against the man. I liked him — guess everybody did — but the contract he was up against was too big for him. Had his first crop frozen, and lost his nerve and judgment after that — the man who gets ahead here must have the grit to stand up against a few bad seasons. Marston acted foolishly; wasted his money buying machines and teams he could have done without, and then let up when he saw it wouldn't pay him to use them right off; but that was part his wife's fault. She drove him pretty hard — though, in some ways, I guess he needed it."

George frowned. Sylvia, he admitted, was ambitious, and she might have put a little pressure upon Marston now and then; but that she should have urged him on toward ruin in her eagerness to get rich was incredible.

"I think you must be mistaken about his wife," he remarked.

"Well," drawled the Canadian, "I'm not always right."

Then a bell tolled outside, an official shouted the names of towns, and there was a sudden stir and murmur of voices in the great waiting-room. Men seized their bags and bundles, women dragged sleepy children to their feet, and a crowd began to press about the outlet.

"Guess that's our train. She's going to be pretty full," said the Canadian.

The party joined a stream of hurrying passengers, and regretted their haste when they were violently driven through the door and into a railed-off space on the platform, where shouting railroad-hands were endeavoring to restrain the surging crowd. Nobody heeded them; the immigrants' patience was exhausted, and they had suddenly changed from a dully apathetic multitude waiting in various stages of dejection to a savage mob fired by one determined purpose. Near by stood a long row of lighted cars, and the immigrants meant to get on board them without loss of time. There were two gates, guarded by officials who endeavored to discriminate between the holders of first and second class tickets, but the crowd was in no mood to submit to the separation.

It raged behind the barrier, and when one gate was rashly pushed back a little too far, a clamorous, jostling mass of humanity stormed the opening. Its guardians were flung aside, helpless, and the foremost of the mob poured out upon the platform, while the pressure about the gap grew insupportable. Women screamed, children were reft away from their mothers, panting men trampled over bags and bundles torn from their owners' hands, and George and the elderly Canadian struggled determinedly to prevent

the girl's being badly crushed. Edgar had disappeared, though they once heard his voice, raised in angry protest.

They were forced close up to the outlet, when there was a check. More officials had been summoned; somebody had dropped a heavy box which obstructed the passage, and a group of passengers began a savage fight for its recovery. George seized a man who was jostling the girl and thrust him backward; but the next moment he was struck by somebody, and he saw nothing of his companions when, after being violently driven to and fro, he reached the gate. A woman with two screaming children clinging to her appeared beside him, and he held a man so that she might pass. He was breathless, and almost exhausted, but he secured her a little room; and then the pressure suddenly slackened. The crowd swept out like a flood from a broken dam, and in a few more moments George stood, gasping, on the platform amid a thinner stream of running people. There was no sign of the Canadian or his daughter; the cars were besieged; and George waited until Edgar joined him, flushed and disheveled.

"I suppose I was lucky in getting through with only my jacket badly torn," said the lad. "I wondered why the railroad people caged up their passengers behind iron bars, but now I know."

George laughed.

"I don't think this kind of thing is altogether usual. Owing to the accident, they've no doubt had two trainloads to handle instead of one. But the platform's emptying; shall we look for a place?"

They managed to enter a car, though the stream of

passengers, pouring in by the two vestibules, met within in dire confusion, choking up the passage with their baggage. Order was, however, restored at last; and, with the tolling of the bell, and a jerk that flung those unprepared off their feet, the great express got off.

"Nobody left behind," Edgar announced, after a glance through the window. "I can't imagine where they put them all; though I've never seen a train like this. But what has become of our Canadian friends?"

George said he did not know, and Edgar resumed:

"I'm rather taken with the girl — strikes me as intelligent as well as fetching. The man's a grim old savage, but I'm inclined to think he's prosperous; when a fellow says he can't afford cigars I generally suspect him of being rich. It's a pity that stinginess is one of the roads to affluence."

The car, glaringly lighted by huge lamps, was crowded and very hot, and after a while George went out on to the rear platform for a breath of air. The train had now left the city, and glancing back as it swung around a curve, he wondered how one locomotive could haul the long row of heavy cars. Then he looked out across the wide expanse of grass that stretched away in the moonlight to the dim blur of woods on the horizon. Here and there clumps of willows dotted the waste, but it lay silent and empty, without sign of human life. The air was pleasantly fresh after heavy rain; and the stillness of the vast prairie was soothing by contrast with the tumult from which they had recently escaped.

Lighting his pipe, George leaned contentedly on the

rail. Then remembering what the Canadian had said, he thought of his old friend Marston, a man of charm and varied talents, whom he had long admired and often rather humbly referred to. It was hard to understand how Dick had failed in Canada, and harder still to see why he had made his plodding comrade his executor; for George, having seldom had occasion to exert his abilities, had no great belief in them. He had suffered keenly when Sylvia married Dick, but the homage he had offered her had always been characterized by diffidence, springing from a doubt that she could be content with him; and after a sharp struggle he succeeded in convincing himself that his wound did not matter if she were happier with the more brilliant man. He had entertained no hard thoughts of her: Sylvia could do no wrong. His love for her sprang rather from respect than passion; in his eyes she was all that a woman ought to be.

In the meanwhile his new friends were discussing him in a car farther back along the train.

"I'm glad I had that Englishman by me in the crowd," the man remarked. "He's cool and kept his head, did what was needed and nothing else. I allow you owe him something for bringing you through."

"Yes," said the girl; "he was quick and resolute." Then reserving the rest of her thoughts, she added: "His friend's amusing."

"Percy? Oh, yes," agreed her father. "Nothing to notice about him — he's just one of the boys. The other's different. What that fellow takes in hand he'll go through with."

"You haven't much to form an opinion on."

"That doesn't count. I can tell if a man's to be trusted when I see him."

"You're generally right," the girl admitted. "You were about Marston. I was rather impressed by him when he first came out."

Her father smiled.

"Just so. Marston had only one trouble — he was all on top. You saw all his good points in the first few minutes. It was rough on him that they weren't the ones that are needed in this country."

"It's a country that demands a great deal," the girl said thoughtfully.

"Sure," was the dry reply. "The prairie breaks the weak and shiftless pretty quick; we only have room for hard men who'll stand up against whatever comes along."

"And do you think that description fits the Englishman we met?"

"Well," said her father, "I guess he wouldn't back down if things went against him."

He went out for a smoke, and the girl considered what he had said. It was not a matter of much consequence, but she knew he seldom made mistakes, and in this instance she agreed with him. As it happened, George's English relatives included one or two clever people, but none of them held his talents in much esteem. They thought him honest, rather painstaking, and good-natured, but that was all. It was left for two strangers to form a juster opinion; which was, perhaps, a not altogether unusual thing. Besides, the standards are different in western Canada. There, a man is judged by what he can do.

CHAPTER V

THE PRAIRIE

AFTER a hot and tedious journey, George and his companion alighted one afternoon at a little station on a branch line, and Edgar looked about with interest when the train went on again. A telegraph office with a baggage-room attached occupied the middle of the low platform, a tall water-tank stood at the end, and three grain elevators towered high above a neighboring side-track. Facing the track, stood a row of wooden buildings varying in size and style: they included a double-storied hotel with a veranda in front of it, and several untidy shacks. Running back from them, two short streets, thinly lined with small houses, led to a sea of grass.

"Sage Butte doesn't strike one as a very exhilarating place," George remarked. "We'll stroll round it, and then see about rooms, since we have to stay the night."

They left the station, but the main street had few attractions to offer. Three stores, with strangely-assorted, dusty goods in their windows fronted the rickety plankwalk; beyond these stood a livery stable, a Chinese laundry, and a few dwelling-houses. Several dilapidated wagons and buggies were scattered about the uneven road. In the side street, disorderly rows of agricultural implements surrounded

a store, and here and there little board dwellings with wire mosquito-doors and net-guarded windows, stood among low trees. Farther back were four very small wooden churches. It was unpleasantly hot, though a fresh breeze blew clouds of dust through the place.

"I've seen enough," said Edgar. "The Butte isn't pretty; we'll assume it's prosperous, though I haven't noticed much sign of activity yet. Let's go to the hotel."

When they reached it, several untidy loungers sat half asleep in the shade of the veranda, and though they obstructed the approach to the entrance none of them moved. Passing behind them, George opened a door filled in with wire-mesh, and they entered a hot room with a bare floor, furnished with a row of plain wooden chairs. After they had rung a bell for several minutes, a man appeared and looked at them with languid interest from behind a short counter.

"Can you put us up?" George inquired.

"Sure," was the answer.

The man flung down a labeled key, twisted round his register, which was fitted in a swivel frame, and handed George a pen.

"We want two rooms," Edgar objected.

"Can't help that. We've only got one."

"I suppose we'd better take it. Where can one get a drink?"

"Bar," replied the other, indicating a gap in a neighboring partition.

"They're laconic in this country," Edgar remarked. "Ever since I arrived in it, I've felt as if I were a mere piece of baggage, to be hustled along anyway without my wishes counting."

"You'll get used to it after a while," George consoled him.

Entering the dark bar, Edgar refreshed himself with several ice-cooled drinks, served in what he thought were unusually small glasses. He felt somewhat astonished when he paid for them.

"Thirst's expensive on the prairie," he commented.

"Pump outside," drawled the attendant. "It's rather mean water."

They went upstairs to a very scantily furnished, doubled-bedded room. George, warned by previous experience, glanced around.

"There's soap and a towel, anyway; but I don't see any water," he remarked. "I'll take the jar; they'll have a rain-tank somewhere about."

Edgar did not answer him. He was looking out of the open window, and now that there was little to obstruct his view, the prospect interested him. It had been a wet spring, and round the vast half-circle he commanded the prairie ran back to the horizon, brightly green, until its strong coloring gave place in the distance to soft neutral tones. It was blotched with crimson flowers; in the marshy spots there were streaks of purple; broad squares of darker wheat checkered the sweep of grass, and dwarf woods straggled across it in broken lines. In one place was the gleam of a little lake. Over it all there hung a sky of dazzling blue, across which great rounded cloud-masses rolled.

Edgar looked around as George came in with the water.

"That's great!" he exclaimed, indicating the prairie; and then, turning toward the wooden town,

he added: "What a frightful mess man can make of pretty things! Still, I've no doubt the people who built the Butte are proud of it."

"If you talk to them in that style, you'll soon discover their opinion," George laughed; "but I don't think it would be wise."

Soon afterward a bell rang for supper, and going down to a big room, they found seats at a table which had several other occupants. Two of them, who appeared to be railroad-hands, were simply dressed in trousers and slate-colored shirts, and when they rested their elbows on the tablecloth, they left grimy smears. George thought the third man of the party, who was neatly attired, must be the station-agent; the fourth was unmistakably a newly-arrived Englishman. As soon as they were seated, a very smart young woman came up and rattled off the names of various unfamiliar dishes.

"I think I'll have a steak; I know what that is," Edgar told her.

She withdrew, and presently surrounded him with an array of little plates, at which he glanced dubiously before he attacked the thin, hard steak with a nickeled knife which failed to make a mark on it. When he made a more determined effort, it slid away from him, sweeping some greasy fried potatoes off his plate, and he grew hot under the stern gaze of the girl, who reappeared with some coffee he had not ordered.

"Perhaps you had better take it away before I do more damage, and let me have some fish," he said humbly.

"Another time you'll say what you want at first.

You can't prospect right through the menu," she rebuked him.

In the meanwhile George had been describing his companions on the train to one of the men opposite.

"He told me he was located in the district, but I didn't learn his name, and he didn't get off here," he explained. "Do you know him?"

"Sure," said the other. "It's Alan Grant, of Poplar, 'bout eighteen miles back. Guess he went on to the next station — a little farther, but it's easier driving, now they're dumping straw on the trail."

"Putting straw on the road?" Edgar broke in. "Why are they doing that?"

"You'll see, if you drive out north," the man answered shortly. Then he turned to his better-dressed companion. "What are you going to do with that carload of lumber we got for Grant?"

"Send the car on to Benton."

"She's billed here."

"Can't help that — the road's mistake. Grant ordered all his stuff to Benton. What he says goes."

This struck George as significant — it was only a man of importance whose instructions would be treated with so much deference. Then the agent turned to Edgar.

"What do you think of this country?"

"The country's very nice. So far as I've seen them, I can't say as much for the towns; they might be prettier."

"Might be prettier?" exclaimed the agent. "If they're not good enough for you, why did you come here?"

"I'm not sure it was a very judicious move. But,

you see, I didn't know what the place was like; and, after all, an experience of this kind is supposed to be bracing."

The agent ignored Edgar after this. He talked to George, and elicited the information that the latter meant to farm. Then he got up, followed by two of the others, and the remaining man with the English appearance turned to George diffidently.

"Do you happen to want a teamster?" he asked.

"I believe I'll want two," was the answer. "But I'm afraid I'll have to hire Canadians."

The man's face fell. He looked anxious, and George remembered having seen a careworn woman tearfully embracing him before their steamer sailed. Her shabby clothes and despairing face had roused George's sympathy.

"Well," said the man dejectedly, "that's for you to decide; but I've driven horses most of my life, and until I get used to things I'd be reasonable about the pay. I was told these little places were the best to strike a job in; but, so far as I can find out, there's not much chance here."

George felt sorry for him. He suddenly made up his mind.

"What are farm teamsters getting now?" he asked a man who was leaving an adjacent table.

"Thirty dollars a month," was the answer.

"Thanks," said George, turning again to the Englishman. "Be ready to start with us to-morrow. I'll take you at thirty dollars; but if I don't get my value out of you, we'll have to part."

"No fear of that, sir," replied the other, in a tone of keen satisfaction.

When they got outside, Edgar looked at George with a smile.

"I'm glad you engaged the fellow," he said; "but considering that you'll have to teach him, were you not a little rash?"

"I'll find out by and by." George paused, and continued gravely: "It's a big adventure these people make. Think of it — the raising of the passage money by some desperate economy, the woman left behind with hardly enough to keep her a month or two, the man's fierce anxiety to find some work! When I saw how he was watching me, I felt I had to hire him."

"Just so," responded Edgar. "I suppose I ought to warn you that doing things of the kind may get you into trouble some day; but cold-blooded prudence never did appeal to me." He took one of the chairs in front of the building and filled his pipe before he continued: "We'll sit here a while, and then we might as well stroll across the plain. The general-room doesn't strike me as an attractive place to spend the evening in."

An hour later they left the tall elevators and straggling town behind, and after brushing through a belt of crimson flowers, they followed the torn-up black trail that led into the waste. After a mile or two it broke into several divergent rows of ruts, and they went on toward a winding line of bluff across the short grass. Reaching that, they pushed through the thin wood of dwarf birch and poplar, skirting little pools from which mallard rose; and then, crossing a long rise, they sat down to smoke on its farther side. Sage Butte had disappeared, the sun had dipped, and the

air was growing wonderfully fresh and cool. Here and there a house or barn rose from the sweep of grass; but for the most part it ran back into the distance lonely and empty. It was steeped in strong, cold coloring, but on its western rim there burned a vivid flush of rose and saffron. Edgar was impressed by its vastness and silence.

"This," he said thoughtfully, "makes up for a good deal. Once you get clear of the railroad, it's a captivating country."

"Have you decided yet what you're going to do in it?"

"It's too soon," Edgar rejoined. "The family idea was that I should stay about twelve months, and then go back and enter some profession. Ethel seems quite convinced that a little roughing it will prove beneficial. I might, however, stop out and try farming, which is one reason why you can have my services for nothing for a time. Considering what local wages are, don't you think you're lucky?"

"That," laughed George, "remains to be seen."

"Anyhow, there's no doubt that Sylvia Marston scores in securing you on the same favorable terms. It has struck me that she's a woman who gets things easily."

"She hasn't always done so. Can you imagine, for instance, what two years on a prairie farm must have been to a delicate, fastidious girl, brought up in luxury?"

"I've an idea that Sylvia would manage to avoid a good many of the hardships."

"Sylvia would never shirk a duty," George declared firmly.

Edgar refilled his pipe.

"I've been thinking about Dick Marston," he said. "After the way he was generally regarded at home, it was strange to hear that Canadian's opinions; but I've a notion that this country's a pretty severe touchstone. I mean that the sort of qualities that make one popular in England may not prove of much use here."

"Dick lost his crop; that accounts for a good deal," George said shortly.

Edgar, knowing how staunch he was to his friends, changed the subject; and when the light grew dim they went back to the hotel. Breakfasting soon after six the next morning, they took their places in a light, four-wheeled vehicle, for which three persons' baggage made a rather heavy load, and drove away with the hired man. The grass was wet with dew, the air invigoratingly cool, and for a time the fresh team carried them across the waste at an excellent pace. When he had got used to the frantic jolting, Edgar found the drive exhilarating. Poplar bluffs, little ponds, a lake shining amid tall sedges, belts of dark-green wheat, went by; and while the horses plunged through tall barley-grass or hauled the vehicle over clods and ruts, the same vast prospect stretched away ahead. It filled the lad with a curious sense of freedom: there was no limit to the prairies — one could go on and on, across still wider stretches beyond the horizon.

By and by, however, they ran in among low sandy hills, dotted with dwarf pines here and there, and the pace slackened. The grass was thin, the wheels sank in deep, loose sand, and the sun was getting unpleasantly hot. For half an hour they drove on; and

then the team came to a standstill, flecked with spume, at the foot of a short, steep rise. Edgar alighted and found the heat almost insupportable. There was glaring sand all about him, and the breeze which swept the prairie was cut off by the hill in front.

"You'll have to help the team," George told him, as he went to the horses' heads.

Edgar and the hired man each seized a wheel and endeavored to start the vehicle, while the horses plunged in the slipping sand. They made a few yards, with clouds of grit flying up about them, and afterward came to a stop again. Next they tried pushing; and after several rests they arrived, breathless and gasping, at the crest of the rise. There was a big hollow in front, and on the opposite side a ridge which looked steeper than the last one.

"How much do you think there is of this?" Edgar inquired.

"I can't say," George answered. "I know of one belt that runs for forty miles."

Even walking downhill was laborious, for they sank ankle-deep, but it was very much worse when they faced the ascent. Short as the hill was, it took them some time to climb; and, with the hired man's assistance, Edgar carried a heavy trunk up the last part of it. Then he sat down.

"I'm not sure I can smoke, but I intend to try," he said. "If you mean to rush the next hill right off, you will go without me." He turned to the hired man. "What do you think of these roads, Grierson?"

"I've seen better, sir," the other answered cautiously. "Perhaps the hills don't go on very far."

Edgar ruefully glanced ahead at scattered pines, clumps of brush, and ridges of gleaming sand.

"It's my opinion there's no end to them! Hauling a load of wheat through this kind of country must be a bit of an undertaking."

After a short rest, they toiled for an hour through the sand; and then rode slowly over a road thickly strewn with straw, which bore the wheels. It led them across lower ground to a strong wire fence, where it forked: one branch skirting the barrier along the edge of a muskeg, the other running through the enclosed land. Deciding to take the latter, George got down at the entrance, which was barred by several strands of wire, firmly fastened.

"Half an hour's work here," Edgar commented. "Driving's rather an arduous pastime in western Canada."

They crossed a long field of barley, a breadth of wheat, and passed an empty house; then wound through a poplar wood until they reached the grass again. It was long and rank, hiding the ruts and hollows in the trail; but after stopping a while for dinner in the shadow of a bluff, they jolted on, and in the afternoon they reached a smoother track. Crossing a low rise, they saw a wide stretch of wheat beneath them, with a house and other buildings near its margin.

"That," said George, "is Sylvia's farm."

Half an hour later, they drove through the wheat, at which George glanced dubiously; and then, traversing a belt of light sandy clods partly grown with weeds, they drew up before the house. It was double-storied, roomy, and neatly built of wood; but it was in very

bad repair, and the barn and stables had a neglected and half-ruinous look. Implements and wagons which had suffered from exposure to the weather, stood about outside. Edgar noticed that George's face was grave.

"I am afraid we have our work cut out," he said. "We'll put up the team, and then look round the place and see what needs doing first."

CHAPTER VI

GEORGE GETS TO WORK

IT was an oppressive evening, after a day of unusual heat. Edgar sat smoking outside the homestead. He had been busy since six o'clock that morning, and he felt tired and downcast. Massed thunderclouds brooded over the silent prairie, wheat and grass had faded to dingy green and lifeless gray, and Edgar tried to persuade himself that his moodiness was the effect of the weather. This was partly the case, but he was also suffering from homesickness and a shrinking from what was new and strange.

The wooden house had a dreary, dilapidated look; the weathered, neglected appearance of barns and stables was depressing. It was through a neighboring gap in the fence that Marston's team had brought their lifeless master home; and Edgar had seen enough to realize that the man must have grown slack and nerveless before he had succumbed. The farm had broken down Marston's strength and courage, and now another man, less gifted in many ways, had taken it in charge. Edgar wondered how he would succeed; but in spite of a few misgivings he had confidence in George.

After a while the latter, who had been examining Marston's farming books, came out, looking grave; he had worn a serious air since their arrival.

"There'll have to be a change," he said. "Dick's accounts have given me something to think about. I believe I'm beginning to understand now how his money went."

"I suppose you haven't got the new program cut and dried yet?" Edgar suggested.

George was seldom precipitate.

"No," he answered. "I've a few ideas in my mind."

"Won't you have some trouble about finances, if the alterations are extensive?"

"I'll have to draw on my private account, unless Herbert will assist."

"Herbert won't do anything of the kind," said Edgar decidedly.

George, making no answer, called Grierson from the stable.

"You'll drive in to the settlement after breakfast to-morrow, Tom," he said. "Tell the man I'll keep the team, if he'll knock off twenty dollars, and he can have his check when he likes. Then bring out the flour and groceries."

"I suppose I won't be going in again for a while; we'll be too busy?"

"It's very likely," said Edgar, knowing his comrade's temperament.

"Then I wonder if I could draw a pound or two?" asked Grierson diffidently.

"Why?" George questioned him. "The Immigration people would see that you had some money before they let you in."

"I've four pounds now; I want to send something home at once."

"Ah!" said George. "I see. How much did you leave your wife?"

"About three pounds, sir; I had to bring enough to pass me at Quebec."

"Then if you give me what you have, I'll let you have a check for twice as much on an English bank. Better get your letter written."

Grierson's look was very expressive as he turned away with a word of thanks; and Edgar smiled at George.

"You have bought that fellow — for an advance of four pounds," he said.

George showed a little embarrassment.

"I was thinking of the woman," he explained.

Then he pointed to the prairie.

"There's a rig coming. It looks like visitors."

Soon afterward, Grant, whom they had met on the train, drew up his team and helped his daughter down.

"We were passing and thought we'd look in," he said. "Found out yesterday that you were located here."

George called Grierson to take the team, and leading the new arrivals to the house, which was still in disorder, he found them seats in the kitchen. It was rather roughly and inadequately furnished, and Edgar had decided that Sylvia had spent little of her time there. After they had talked for a while, a man, dressed in blue duck trousers, a saffron-colored shirt, and an old slouch hat, which he did not remove, walked in, carrying a riding quirt. Grant returned his greeting curtly, and then the man addressed George.

"I heard you were running this place," he said.

"That's correct."

"Then I put in the wheat on your summer fallow; Mrs. Marston told me to. Thought I'd come along and let you have the bill."

His manner was assertively offhand, and George did not ask him to sit down.

"It's a very second-rate piece of work," George said. "You might have used the land-packer more than you did."

"It's good enough. Anyway, I'll trouble you for the money."

Edgar was sensible of indignation mixed with amusement. This overbearing fellow did not know George Lansing.

"I think you had better take off your hat before we go any farther — it's customary. Then you may tell me what I owe you."

The man looked astonished, but he complied with the suggestion, and afterward stated his charge, which was unusually high. Edgar noticed that Grant was watching George with quiet interest.

"I suppose you have a note from Mrs. Marston fixing the price?"

The other explained that the matter had been arranged verbally.

"Was anybody else present when you came to terms?" George asked.

"You can quit feeling, and pay up!" exclaimed the stranger. "I've told you how much it is."

"The trouble is that you're asking nearly double the usual charge per acre."

Grant smiled approvingly, but the man advanced

with a truculent air to the table at which George was sitting.

"I've done the work; that's good enough for me."

"You have done it badly, but I'll give you a check now, based on the regular charge, which should come to"— George made a quick calculation on a strip of paper and handed it to the man. "This is merely because you seem in a hurry. If you're not satisfied, you can wait until I get an answer from Mrs. Marston; or I'll ask some of my neighbors to arbitrate."

The man hesitated, with anger in his face.

"I guess I'll take the check," he said sullenly.

Crossing the floor, George took a pen and some paper from a shelf.

"Sit here," he said, when he came back, "and write me a receipt."

The other did as he was bidden, and George pointed toward the door.

"That's settled; I won't keep you."

The man looked hard at him, and then went quietly out; and Grant leaned back in his seat with a soft laugh.

"You fixed him," he remarked. "He has the name of being a tough."

"I suppose an Englishman newly out is considered lawful prey."

"A few of them deserve it," Grant returned dryly. "But let that go. What do you think of the place?"

George felt that he could trust the farmer. He had spent a depressing day, during which all he saw had discouraged him. Marston had farmed in a singularly wasteful manner; fences and outbuildings were in very bad repair; half the implements were

useless; and it would be a long and costly task to put things straight.

"I feel that I'll have my hands full. In fact, I'm a little worried about it; there are so many changes that must be made."

"Sure. Where are you going to begin?"

"By getting as much summer fallowing as possible done on the second quarter-section. The first has been growing wheat for some time; I'll sew part of that with timothy. There's one bit of stiff land I might put in flax. I've thought of trying corn for the silo."

"Timothy and a silo?" commented Grant. "You're going in for stock, then? It means laying out money, and a slow return."

"I'm afraid so. Still, you can't grow cereals year after year on this light soil. It's a wasteful practise that will have to be abandoned, as people here seem to be discovering. Grain won't pay at sixteen bushels to the acre."

"A sure thing," Grant agreed. "I'm sticking right to wheat, but that's because I'm too old to change my system, and I'm on black soil, which holds out longer."

"But you're taking the nature out of it."

"It will see me through if I fallow," said Grant. "When I've done with it and sell out, somebody else can experiment with mixed crops and stock-raising. That's going to become the general plan, but it's costly at the beginning." Then he rose. "I'll walk round the place with you."

They went out, and the girl fell behind with Edgar. He had learned that her name was Flora.

"Mr. Lansing seems to understand farming," she remarked. "He didn't tell us he had been on the prairie before."

"He hasn't told you now," Edgar pointed out. "George never does tell things about himself unless there's a reason."

"He soon got rid of the fellow who sowed the crop."

Edgar laughed.

"I knew the man would meet with a surprise. George's abilities are not, as a rule, obvious at first sight. People find them out by accident, and then they're somewhat startled."

"You're evidently an admirer of his. Do you mean to go in for farming?"

"I am, though I wouldn't have him suspect it," said Edgar. "In answer to the other question, I haven't made up my mind. Farming as it's carried on in this country seems to be a rather arduous occupation. In the meanwhile, I'm undergoing what English people seem to think of as the Canadian cure; that is, I've been given a chance for readjusting my ideas and developing my character."

"Under Mr. Lansing's guidance?"

Edgar realized that the girl was less interested in him than in George, but he did not resent this.

"You're smart. I believe my people entertained some idea of that nature; George is considered safe. Still, to prevent any misapprehension, I'd better point out that my chief failings are a fondness for looking at the amusing side of things and a slackness in availing myself of my opportunities. As an instance of

the latter defect, I'm boring you by talking about Lansing."

Flora regarded him with a quiet smile.

"It struck me that you were saying something about yourself."

"I suppose that's true," Edgar admitted. "It clears the ground."

"For what?"

"For an extension of our acquaintance, among other things."

"Do you want it extended?"

They had stopped at the edge of a hollow filled with tall, harsh grass, and Edgar studied her while he considered his answer. There was nothing that suggested coquetry in the faint amusement she displayed; this was a girl with some depth of character, though he realized that she was pretty. She carried herself well; she was finely and strongly made; her gray eyes were searching; and she had a rather commanding manner. Her hair was a warm brown, clustering low on a smooth forehead; nose and lips and chin were firmly molded.

"Yes," he answered candidly; "I'm feeling the strangeness of the country, and I've an idea that both George and I may need friends in it. It strikes me that you and your father would prove useful ones."

"Well," she said, "he's sometimes called hard, and he's a little prejudiced on certain points, but he can be very staunch to those he takes a liking to."

"I believe," Edgar rejoined, "that also applies to you; I don't mean the first of it."

Flora changed the subject.

"I gather that you're not favorably impressed with the place."

"I'm not. If I had to farm it, I'd feel scared; and I don't think George is happy. It's hard to understand how Marston let it get into such a state."

"He was unfitted for the work, and he was further handicapped."

"How?" Edgar asked.

"You may have noticed that while economy ruled outside, the house is remarkably well furnished. The money Marston spent in Winnipeg stores should have gone into the land."

Edgar nodded; he did not agree with George's opinion of Sylvia.

"You don't seem to approve of the way Mrs. Marston managed things. It's rather curious. I always thought her pretty capable in some respects."

"That's very possible," said Flora with a hint of dryness.

"After all, it may not have been her fault," Edgar suggested. "Marston was a generous fellow; he may have insisted on thinking first of her comfort."

"Then she ought to have stopped him," said Flora firmly. "Do you think a woman should let a man spoil his one chance of success in order to surround her with luxury?"

"The answer's obvious."

A dazzling flash of lightning leaped from the mass of somber cloud overhead, and they turned back toward the house, which George and Grant reached soon afterward. Grant said that he must get home before the storm broke, and Grierson brought out his spirited team. It had grown nearly dark; a curious

leaden haze obscured the prairie; and when the man was getting into his light, spring-seated wagon, a jagged streak of lightning suddenly reft the gloom and there was a deafening roll of thunder. The horses started, Grant fell backward from the step, dropping the reins; and while the others stood dazzled by the flash, the terrified animals backed the vehicle with a crash against the stable. Then they plunged madly forward toward the fence, with the reins trailing along the ground. Flora had got in before her father, and she was now helpless.

It was too late when Grant got up; Grierson and Edgar were too far away, and the latter stood still, wondering with a thrill of horror what the end would be; he did not think the horses saw the thin wire fence, and the gap in it was narrow. If they struck a post in going through, the vehicle would overturn. Then George, running furiously, sprang at the horses' heads, and went down, still holding on. He was dragged along a few yards, but the pace slackened, and Edgar ran forward with Grierson behind him. For a few moments there was a savage struggle, but they stopped and held the team, until Grant coolly cleared the reins and flung them to his daughter.

"Stick tight while I get up, and then watch out," he said to the others.

He was seated in another moment, the girl quietly making room for him; then, to Edgar's astonishment, he lashed the frantic horses with the whip, and, plunging forward, they swept madly through the opening in the fence, with the wagon jolting from rut to rut. A minute or two afterward they had vanished into the thick obscurity that veiled the waste of grass, and

there was a dazzling flash and a stunning roll of thunder. George, flushed and breathless, looked around with a soft laugh.

"Grant has pretty good nerve," he said.

"That's so, sir," Grierson agreed. "Strikes me he'll take some of the wickedness out of his team before he gets them home. I noticed that Miss Grant didn't look the least bit afraid."

Then a deluge of rain drove them into the house, where Edgar sat smoking thoughtfully; for what Flora Grant had said about Sylvia had a disturbing effect on him. It looked as if her selfish regard for her comfort had hampered Marston in his struggle; and though Edgar had never had much faith in Sylvia, this was painful to contemplate. Moreover, George cherished a steadfast regard for her, which complicated things; but Edgar prudently decided that the matter was a delicate one and must be left to the people most concerned. After all, Miss Grant might be mistaken.

CHAPTER VII

A CATTLE DRIVE

GEORGE was summer fallowing, sitting in the iron saddle of a plow which a heavy Clydesdale team hauled through the stubble. The work should have been done earlier, for the soil on the Marston farm was very light, and, as it had already grown several crops of cereals, George was anxious to expose it to the influence of sun and wind as soon as possible. It was about the middle of the afternoon and very hot. Rounded cloud-masses overhung the plain, but dazzling sunshine fell on grass and stubble, and a haze of dust surrounded the team, while now and then the fine soil and sand, blown from the rest of the fallow by the fresh breeze, swept by in streams. George wore motor-goggles to protect his eyes, but his face and hands felt scorched and sore. Farther back, Edgar plodded behind a lighter team, making very poor progress.

Presently George looked up and saw Flora Grant riding toward him. She sat astride, but her skirt fell in becoming lines, and he thought the gray blouse and wide Stetson hat, with a red band round it, most effective. She reined up her horse near the plow, and George got down.

"I was passing — going on to Forsyth's place —

and my father asked me to call," she said. "You were talking about buying cattle, and a man at Dunblane has some good Herefords to sell. Father thinks they would suit you."

"His recommendation carries weight," said George. "I'll go and see them. I must thank you for bringing me word."

"I've another message. It's this — when you're buying stock, be cautious how you bid."

"As I'm not well up in local prices, I wish Mr. Grant had been a little plainer."

"He went farther than I expected. You see, as a friend of the seller, he's awkwardly fixed."

"Just so," said George. "But, if you're not in the same position, you might give me a hint. How much is the value of Canadian cattle usually below the price likely to be asked of a new arrival?"

"In this case, I should say about fifty per cent.," Flora answered, with a laugh.

"Thank you," responded George. "I am sure your opinion's to be relied on."

Edgar stopped his team near by, and Flora regarded him with amusement as he came toward them, his red face streaked with dust.

"You look a good deal more like a western farmer than you did when I saw you last," she laughed.

Edgar removed his goggles and surveyed his working attire somewhat disgustedly.

"I wonder whether that's a compliment; but now that I've made the first plunge, I'd better go through with it — get a flappy hat and a black shirt, or one of those brilliant orange ones."

"The latter are more decorative. But, as you are

going on a two days' journey to drive some cattle, I'll tell you how to find the way."

"You had better tell George. I can only remember the things that interest me."

Flora gave them clear instructions, and when she rode away George turned to Edgar.

"You'll have to come, and we'll start at once. Grierson can go on plowing with the Clydesdales, which is more than you could do."

"I'm afraid I must admit it," said Edgar, glancing at his ragged furrow. "But I'm going to have my supper and put up some provisions before I leave the place."

They set out an hour later, and safely reached their destination, where George purchased a dozen cattle. They were big, red and white, long-horned animals, accustomed to freedom, for fences are still scarce on tracts of the prairie, and they ranged about the corral in a restless manner. Edgar, leaning on the rails, watched them dubiously.

"They look unusually active," he remarked. "I'm not an expert at cattle-driving, but I suppose two of us ought to take them home."

The rancher laughed.

"Two's quite a good allowance for that small bunch, but if you keep north among the scrub poplar, you won't be bothered by many fences. It's pretty dry in summer, but you'll get good water in Baxter's well, if you head for the big bluff you'll see tomorrow afternoon. We'll let them out when you're ready."

As soon as the rails were flung down, the cattle rushed out tumultuously, as if rejoicing in their re-

stored freedom. Then, while George and his companion mounted, they started off across the prairie at a steady trot.

"A mettlesome lot; seem to be in good training," Edgar commented. "Have you any idea where they're going?"

"Guess they're heading for a creek two miles back; water's scarce," explained the rancher. "As it's near the trail, you had better let them go. You'll round them up quite easy when they've had a drink."

George and Edgar rode after the cattle. The sun was getting low, but the temperature showed no signs of falling, and the men were soon soaked in perspiration. The herd went on at a good pace, making for a wavy line of timber, and on reaching it, plunged down the side of a declivity among little scattered trees. A stream trickled through willow bushes and tall grass in the bottom of the hollow, and the men had trouble in forcing the cattle to leave the water. Before they accomplished it, Edgar had got very wet and had scratched himself badly in scrambling through the brush.

"Driving stock is by no means so easy as it looks," he grumbled, when they had climbed the opposite ascent, leading their horses. "The way these beasts jump about among the bushes confuses you; I'd have sworn there were forty of them in the ravine."

"I see only nine now," George said pointedly.

Edgar looked back into the hollow.

"There are three of the brutes slipping away upstream as fast as they can go! You're smarter at the thing than I am — hadn't you better go after them?"

"I expect I'll be needed to keep this bunch together," George rejoined.

Edgar strode away, but it was half an hour later when he came back, hot and angry, with the cattle crashing through the brush in front of him. Then the reunited herd set off at a smart pace across the plain.

"They seem fond of an evening gallop," Edgar remarked. "Anyhow, they're going the right way, which strikes me as something to be thankful for."

They rode on, and it was getting dark when they checked the herd near a straggling poplar bluff. The grass was good, the beasts began to feed quietly, and after picketing their horses the men lay down on their blankets. It was growing cooler, a vivid band of green still flickered along the prairie's rim, and the deep silence was intensified by the soft sound the cattle made cropping the dew-damped herbage.

"I wonder if they go to sleep," mused Edgar. "I'm beginning to think this kind of thing must be rather fine when one gets used to it. It's a glorious night."

By and by he drew his blanket round him and sank into slumber; but for a while George, who had paid a high price for a Hereford bull, lay awake, thinking and calculating. It would cost a good deal more than he had anticipated to work the farm; Sylvia had no funds that could be drawn upon, and his means were not large. Economy and good management would be needed, but he was determined to make a success of his undertaking. At last, seeing that the herd showed no signs of moving, he went to sleep.

Awakening at sunrise George found that, except for

the horses, there was not a beast in sight. For an hour he and West hunted them through the bluff; and then, after making a hurried breakfast, they went on their way again. It rapidly got hotter, the stock traveled quietly, and, with a halt or two where a clump of poplars offered a little shade, they rode, scorched by dazzling sunshine, across the limitless plain. In the afternoon George began to look eagerly for the bluff that the rancher mentioned. They had found no water, and the cattle seemed distressed. The glare and heat were getting intolerable, but the vast, gradual rise in front of them ran on, unbroken, to the skyline. Its crest, however, must be crossed before evening; and they toiled on.

At last, the long ascent was made, and George felt relieved when he saw a dark line of trees in the wide basin below him.

"That must be the big bluff where the well is; though I don't see a house," he said.

They had some trouble in urging the herd down the slope, but after a while they reached the welcome shadow of the trees, and Edgar broke into a shout when he saw a rude wooden platform with a windlass upon it and a trough near by.

"Ride ahead with the horses and water them," said George, dismounting.

Edgar did as he was bidden, but presently the herd, attracted by the sight of water, came surging round the trough, savagely jostling one another. The lad worked hard with the windlass, but he could not keep them supplied, and they crowded on the low platform covering the well, with heads stretched out eagerly toward the dripping bucket. After being flung

against the windlass by a thirsty beast, Edgar called to his companion.

"They'll break through if you're not quick! It's my opinion they're bent on getting down the well!"

George came to his assistance with his riding quirt, but when they were supplying the last two or three unsatisfied animals, a man ran out of the bluff.

"What in thunder are you doing with our water?" he cried.

"He looks angry," Edgar commented. "When that rancher fellow told us about the well, he didn't mention the necessity of asking Mr. Baxter's permission." Then he waved his hand to the stranger. "Come here and have a talk!"

The man came on at a quicker run. His face was hot with indignation, and on reaching them he broke into breathless and pointed expostulations.

"When you're quite through, we'll assess the damages," George quietly told him.

The farmer's anger began to dissipate.

"No," he said; "that would be taking a pretty mean pull on you; but water's scarce, and you can't have any more."

"Well," requested George, "have you a paddock or corral you could let me put this bunch of cattle into until the morning? I'm willing to pay for the accommodation."

"I can't do it," replied the other. "I want all the fenced grass I've got. Take them right along, and you'll strike a creek about six miles ahead. Then you ought to make the river to-morrow night."

It was obvious that he desired to be rid of them; and as it was getting cooler George resumed his

journey. He found the creek early the next morning, and as the day promised to be unusually hot he delayed only until he had watered the stock. In an hour or two the sun was hidden by banks of leaden cloud, but the temperature did not fall and there was an oppressive heaviness in the air. The prairie had faded to a sweep of lifeless gray, obscured above its verge. The men made progress, however; and late in the afternoon a winding line of timber that marked the river's course appeared ahead. Shortly afterward, Edgar looked around.

"That's a curious streak of haze in the distance," he remarked.

"It's smoke," said George. "Grass fires are not uncommon in hot weather. It looks like a big one."

They urged the cattle on a little faster, but it was evening when they reached the first of the trees. George rode forward between them and pulled up his horse in some concern. The ford had been difficult when they crossed it on the outward journey, but now the space between bank and bank was filled by an angry flood. It rolled by furiously, lapping in frothy ripples upon the steep slope that led down to it.

"Nearly an extra three feet of water; there'd be a risk in crossing," he said, when Edgar joined him. "We couldn't make the place where the trail runs in, and the landing down-stream from it looks bad."

"Then what ought we to do?" Edgar inquired.

"Wait until to-morrow. There's no doubt been a heavy thunderstorm higher up, but the water should soon run down." George glanced back toward the prairie dubiously. "I'm a little anxious about the fire; but, after all, it may not come near us."

The cattle did not wander far after drinking, and the men ate their supper. It grew dark, but the heat did not lessen, and the oppressive air was filled with a smell of burning. Looking back between the trees, they could see a long streak of yellow radiance leaping up, and growing dim when the view was obstructed by clouds of smoke.

"It's an awkward situation, and, as if it were not bad enough, there's a big thunderstorm brewing," Edgar said at length. "I'll go along and look at the mark you made upon the bank."

He strode away among the trees. It was very dark. The tethered horses were moving restlessly; but, so far as Edgar could make out, the cattle were bunched together. After lighting a match he came back.

"The water's falling, but only slowly," he reported. "Should we try to drive the stock along the bank?"

"We couldn't herd them in the dark. Besides, it's an extensive fire, and I'm doubtful whether we could get down to the water farther along."

They waited for an hour, keeping the cattle together with some trouble, and watching the blaze, which grew brighter rapidly. At last, wisps of pungent smoke rolled into the bluff.

"The beasts are ready to stampede!" George suddenly called to Edgar. "We'll have to make a start! Get into the saddle and drive them toward the ford!"

They were very busy for a while. Their horses were hard to manage, the timber was thick, and the herd attempted to break away through it; but at last they reached the steep dip to the waterside. One beast plunged in and vanished, more followed, and George, plying his quirt and shouting, rode in among

the diminishing drove. He felt the water lapping about his boots, and then the horse lost its footing. George dropped from the saddle and seized a stirrup. For some minutes he could see a few dark objects about him, but they disappeared, and he and the horse were swept away down-stream.

He kept hold — the animal was swimming strongly — and after a time a lurid flash of lightning showed him a black mass of trees close ahead. They vanished, the succeeding darkness was impenetrable, and the crash of thunder was deadened by the roar of water. For a moment or two his head was driven under, but when he got it clear, another dazzling flash revealed a high bank only a few yards away, and when thick darkness followed he felt the horse rise to its feet. Then he touched soft bottom, and a little later scrambled up an almost precipitous slope with the bridle in his hand and the horse floundering behind him. They reached the summit, and, stopping among thin timber, it was with strong relief that he heard Edgar's shout. Shortly afterward the lad appeared, leading his horse.

"There's some of the drove on this side; I don't see the rest," he said, glancing toward the opposite bank, where dark trees stood out against a strong red glare. "It strikes me we only got across in time."

Then torrential rain broke upon them, and while they stood, unable to move forward, a cry reached them faintly through the roar of the deluge. It came again when George answered, and was followed by a crackling and snapping of underbrush. Then, as a blaze of lightning filled the bluff with radiance, two men appeared for a moment, leading their horses

among the slender trunks. They were immediately lost to sight again, but presently they came up, and George recognized Grant by his voice.

"So you have got through, Lansing," he cried. "I met Constable Flett on the trail, and, as he told me the river was rising and there was a big fire west, I figured you must be up against trouble."

He asked a few questions and then resumed:

"As you got the stock started, they'll have swum across; but we can't round them up until it's light. There's a deserted shack not far off, and I guess we'll head for it."

The constable agreed; and, mounting when they had got out of the timber, they rode off through the rain.

CHAPTER VIII

CONSTABLE FLETT'S SUSPICIONS

IT was nearly six o'clock in the evening when George and his companions, who had spent part of the day looking for the straying stock, rode up to the Grant homestead through a vast stretch of grain. This grew on the rich black soil they call "gumbo" in the West; but here and there a belt of dark-colored summer fallow checkered the strong green of the wheat and oats. Though he clung to the one-crop system, Alan Grant was careful of his land. The fine brick house and range of smart wooden buildings, the costly implements, which included a gasoline tractor-plow, all indicated prosperity, and George recognized that the rugged-faced man beside him had made a marked success of his farming.

When the cattle had been secured, Flora Grant welcomed the new arrivals graciously, and after a while they sat down to supper with the hired men in a big room. It was plainly furnished, but there was everything that comfort demanded, for the happy mean between bareness and superfluity had been cleverly hit, and George thought Miss Grant was responsible for this. He sat beside her at the foot of the long table and noticed the hired hands' attitude toward her. It was respectful, but not diffident. The girl had no need to assert herself; she was on excellent terms with

the sturdy toilers, who nevertheless cheerfully submitted to her rule.

When the meal was over, Grant led his guests into a smaller room, and produced a bag of domestic tobacco.

"The stock have gone far enough," he said. "You'll stay here to-night."

Flett looked doubtful, though it was obvious that he wished to remain. He was a young, brown-faced man, and his smart khaki uniform proclaimed him a trooper of the Northwest Mounted Police.

"The trouble is that I'm a bit late on my round already," he protested.

"That's soon fixed," said Grant.

He opened a roll-top desk, and wrote a note which he read out:

"'Constable Flett has been detained in the neighborhood of this homestead through having rendered, at my request, valuable assistance in rounding up a bunch of cattle, scattered in crossing the flooded river.'"

"Thanks," said Flett. "That kind of thing counts when they're choosing a corporal."

Grant turned to George with a smile.

"Keep in with the police, Lansing — I've known a good supper now and then go a long way. They may worry you about fireguards and fencing, but they'll stand by you when you're in trouble, if you treat them right. If it's a matter of straying stock, a sick horse, or you don't know how to roof a new barn, you have only to send for the nearest trooper."

"Aren't these things a little outside their duties?" Edgar asked.

The constable grinned.

"Most anything that wants doing badly is right in our line."

"Sure," said Grant. "It's not long since Flett went two hundred miles over the snow with a dog-team to settle a little difference between an Indian and his wife. Then he once brought a hurt trapper a fortnight's journey on his sledge, sleeping in the snow, in the bitterest weather. They were quite alone, and the hurt man was crazy most of the time."

"Then you're supposed to look after the settlers, as well as to keep order?" suggested Edgar, looking admiringly at the sturdy young constable.

"That's so," replied Flett. "They certainly need it. Last winter we struck one crowd in a lonely shack up north — man, woman, and several children huddled on the floor, with nothing to eat, and the stove out — at forty degrees below. There was a bluff a few miles off, but they hadn't a tool of any kind to cut cordwood with. Took us quite a while to haul them up some stores, though we made twelve-hour marches between our camps in the snow. We had to hustle that trip."

He paused and resumed:

"Better keep an eye on that bunch of young horses, Mr. Grant; bring them up nearer the house when the nights get darker. Those Clydesdales are mighty fine beasts and prices are high."

Grant looked astonished.

"I've been here a good many years, and I've never lost a horse," he declared.

"It doesn't follow you'll always be as lucky," the trooper said pointedly.

"I was told that property is as safe in the West as it is in England," Edgar broke in.

"Just so," remarked the trooper. "They say that kind of thing. I never was in the old country, but young mavericks aren't the only stock to go missing in Alberta, which isn't a long way off. The boys there have their hands full now and then, and we have three or four of the worst toughs I've struck right in Sage Butte."

Grant leaned forward on the table, looking steadily at him.

"Hadn't you better tell me what you have in your mind?"

"I can't give you much information, but we got a hint from Regina to keep our eyes open, and from things I've heard it's my idea that now that the boys have nearly stopped the running of Alberta cattle across the frontier, some of the toughs they couldn't track mean to start the same game farther east. Some of you ranchers run stock outside the fences, and I guess one could still find a lonely trail to the American border."

"Well," said Grant, "I'm glad you told me." He turned to George. "Be careful, Lansing; you would be an easier mark."

They strolled outside; and after a while George joined Flora, and sauntered away across the grass with her. It was a clear, still evening, and the air was wonderfully fresh.

"Though he wouldn't let me thank him, I feel I'm seriously indebted to your father, Miss Grant," he said. "Our horses were worn out, and the stock had all scattered when he turned up with the trooper."

"I believe he enjoyed the ride, and the night in the rain," replied Flora. "You see, he had once to work very hard here, and now that things have changed, he finds it rather tame. He likes to feel he's still capable of a little exertion."

"I shouldn't consider him an idle man."

Flora laughed.

"That would be very wrong; but the need for continual effort and the strain of making ends meet, with the chance of being ruined by a frozen crop, have passed. I believe he misses the excitement of it."

"Then I gather that he built up this great farm?"

"Yes; from a free quarter-section. He and my mother started in a two-roomed shack. They were both from Ontario, but she died several years ago." The girl paused. "Sometimes I think she must have had remarkable courage. I can remember her as always ready in an emergency, always tranquil."

George glanced at her as she stood, finely posed, looking out across the waste of grass with gravely steady eyes, and it occurred to him that she resembled her mother in the respects she had mentioned. Nevertheless, he felt inclined to wonder how she had got her grace and refinement. Alan Grant was forceful and rather primitive.

"Have you spent much of your time here?" he asked.

"No," she answered. "My mother was once a school-teacher, and she must have had ambitious views for me. When the farm began to prosper, I was sent to Toronto. After that I went to Montreal, and finally to England."

"You must be fond of traveling."

"Oh," she said, with some reserve, "I had thought of taking up a profession."

"And you have abandoned the idea?"

She looked at him quietly, wondering whether she should answer.

"I had no alternative," she said. "I began to realize it after my mother's death. Then my father was badly hurt in an accident with a team, and I came back. He has nobody else to look after him, and he is getting on in life."

Her words conveyed no hint of the stern struggle between duty and inclination, but George guessed it. This girl, he thought, was one not to give up lightly the career she had chosen.

Then she changed the subject with a smile.

"I suspect that my father approves of you, perhaps because of what you are doing with the land. I think I may say that if you have any little difficulty, or are short of any implements that would be useful, you need only come across to us."

"Thank you," George responded quietly.

"Mr. West mentioned that you were on a farm in this country once before. Why did you give it up?"

"Somebody left me a little money."

"Then what brought you back?"

She was rather direct, but that is not unusual in the West, and George was mildly flattered by the interest she displayed.

"It's a little difficult to answer. For one thing, I was beginning to feel that I was taking life too easily in England. It's a habit that grows on one."

He had no desire to conceal the fact that he had

come out on Sylvia's behalf — it never occurred to him to mention it. He was trying to analyze the feelings which had rendered the sacrifice he made in leaving home a little easier.

"I don't think the dread of acquiring that habit is common among your people," Flora said mischievously. "It doesn't sound like a very convincing reason."

"No," replied George, with a smile. "Still, it had some weight. You see, it isn't difficult to get lazy and slack, and I'd done nothing except a little fishing and shooting for several years. I didn't want to sink into a mere lounger about country houses and clubs. It's pleasant, but too much of it is apt to unfit one for anything else."

"You believe it's safer, for example, to haul stovewood home through the Canadian frost or drive a plow under the scorching sun?"

"Yes; I think I feel something of the kind."

Flora somewhat astonished him by her scornful laugh.

"You're wise," she said. "We have had sportsmen here from your country, and I've a vivid memory of one or two. One could see by their coarse faces that they ate and drank too much; and they seemed determined to avoid discomfort at any cost. I suppose they could shoot, but they could neither strip a gun nor carry it on a long day's march. The last party thought it needful to take a teamload of supplies when they went north after moose. It would have been a catastrophe if they had missed their dinner."

"Going without one's dinner has its inconveniences," said George.

"And thinking too much about it has its perils," she retorted.

George nodded. He thought he knew what she meant, and he agreed with it. He could recall companions who, living for pleasure, had by degrees lost all zest for the more or less wholesome amusements to which they had confined their efforts. Some had become mere club loungers and tattlers; one or two had sunk into gross indulgence. This had had its effect on him: he did not wish to grow red-faced, slothful, and fleshy, as they had done, nor to busy himself with trivialities until such capacities for useful work as he possessed had atrophied.

"Well," he said, "nobody could call this a good country for the pampered loafer."

Flora smiled, and pointed out across the prairie. In the foreground it was flecked with crimson flowers; farther back willow and poplar bluffs stretched in bluish smears across the sweep of grass that ran on beyond them toward the vivid glow of color on the skyline. It was almost beautiful in the soft evening light, but it conveyed most clearly a sense of vastness and solitude. The effect was somehow daunting. One thought of the Arctic winter and the savage storms that swept the wilds.

"I've heard it called hard," she said. "It undoubtedly needs hard men; there is nothing here that can be easily won. That's a fact that the people you're sending over ought to recognize."

"They soon discover it when they get out. When they've had a crop hailed or frozen, the thing becomes obvious."

"Did you lose one?"

"I did," George rejoined rather gloomily. "I've a suspicion that if we get much dry weather and the usual strong winds, I may lose another. The wheat's getting badly cut by driving sand; that's a trouble we don't have to put up with in the old country."

"I'm sorry," said Flora; and he knew she meant it. "But you won't be beaten by one bad season?"

"No," George answered with quiet determination. "I must make a success of this venture, whatever it costs."

She was a little puzzled by his manner, for she did not think he was addicted to being needlessly emphatic; but she asked no questions, and soon afterward the others joined them and they went back to the house. Early on the following morning, George started homeward with his cattle, and as they rode slowly through the barley-grass that fringed the trail, Edgar looked at him with a smile.

"You spent some time in Miss Grant's company," he remarked. "How did she strike you?"

"I like her. She's interesting — I think that's the right word for it. Seems to understand things; talks to you like a man."

"Just so," Edgar rejoined, with a laugh. "She's a lady I've a high opinion of; in fact, I'm a little afraid of her. Though I'm nearly as old as she is, she makes me feel callow. It's a sensation that's new to me."

"And you're a man of experience, aren't you?"

"I suppose I was rather a favorite at home," Edgar owned with humorous modesty. "For all that, I don't feel myself quite up to Miss Grant's standard."

"I didn't notice any assumption of superiority on her part."

"Oh, no," said Edgar. "She doesn't require to assume it; the superiority's obvious; that's the trouble. One hesitates about offering her the small change of compliments that generally went well at home. If you try to say something smart, she looks at you as if she were amused, not at what you said, but at you. There's an embarrassing difference between the things."

"The remedy's simple. Don't try to be smart."

"You would find that easy," Edgar retorted. "Now, in my opinion, Miss Grant is intellectual, which is more than anybody ever accused you of being, but I suspect you would make more progress with her than I could do. Extremes have a way of meeting, and perhaps it isn't really curious that your direct and simple views should now and then recommend you to a more complex person."

"I notice a couple of beasts straying yonder," George said dryly.

Edgar rode off to drive the animals up to the herd. George, he thought, was painfully practical; only such a man could break off the discussion of a girl like Miss Grant to interest himself in the movements of a wandering steer. For all that, the beasts must be turned, and they gave Edgar a hard gallop through willow scrub and tall grass before he could head them off and afterward overtake the drove.

CHAPTER IX

GEORGE TURNS REFORMER

GEORGE was working in the summer fallow a few days after his return from Grant's homestead, when a man rode across the plowing and pulled up his horse beside him. He was on the whole a handsome fellow, well mounted and smartly dressed, but there was a hint of hardness in his expression. George recognized him as the landlord of a hotel at the settlement.

"Your crop's not looking too good," the stranger greeted him.

"No," returned George. "It was badly put in, and we've had unusually dry weather."

"I forgot," the other rejoined. "You're the fellow Jake Gillet had the trouble with. Beat him down on the price, didn't you? He's a bad man to bluff."

"The point that concerned me was that he asked a good deal more than his work was worth."

The man looked at George curiously.

"That's quite possible, but you might have let him down more gently than you did. As a newcomer, you don't want to kick too much or run up against things other folks put up with."

George wondered where the hint he had been given led.

"I rode over to bring this paper for you to sign," the man went on.

Glancing through it, George saw that it was a petition against any curtailment of the licenses at Sage Butte, and a testimonial to the excellent manner in which the Sachem Hotel was conducted by its owner, Oliver Beamish. George had only once entered the place, but it had struck him as being badly kept and frequented by rather undesirable customers.

"Some fool temperance folks are starting a campaign — want to shut the hotels," his visitor explained. "You'll put your name to this."

"I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me, Mr. Beamish. I can't form an opinion; I haven't heard the other side yet."

"Do you want to hear them? Do you like that kind of talk?"

George smiled, though he was not favorably impressed by the man. His tone was too dictatorial; George expected civility when asked a favor.

"After all," he said, "it would only be fair."

"Then you won't sign?"

"No."

Beamish sat silent a moment or two, regarding George steadily.

"One name more or less doesn't matter much, but I'll own that the opinion of you farmers who use my hotel as a stopping-place counts with the authorities," he told him. "I've got quite a few signatures. You want to remember that it won't pay you to go against the general wish."

There was a threat in his manner, and George's face hardened.

"That consideration hasn't much weight with me," he said.

"Well," returned Beamish, "I guess you're wrong; but as there's nothing doing here, I'll get on."

He rode away, and George thought no more of the matter for several days. Then as he was riding home with Edgar from a visit to a neighbor who had a team to sell, they stopped to rest a few minutes in the shade of a poplar bluff. It was fiercely hot on the prairie, but the wood was dim and cool, and George followed Edgar through it in search of saskatoons. The red berries were plentiful, and they had gone farther than they intended when George stopped waist-deep in the grass of a dry sloo, where shallow water had lain in the spring. He nearly fell over something large and hard. Stooping down, he saw with some surprise that it was a wooden case.

"I wonder what's in it?" he said.

"Bottles," reported Edgar, pulling up a board of the lid. "One of the cure-everything tonics, according to the labels. It strikes me as a curious place to leave it in."

George carefully looked about. He could distinguish a faint track, where the grasses had been disturbed, running straight across the sloo past the spot he occupied; but he thought that the person who had made the track had endeavored to leave as little mark as possible. Then he glanced out between the poplar trunks across the sunlit prairie. There was not a house on it; scarcely a clump of timber broke its even surface. The bluff was very lonely; and George remembered that a trail which ran near by led to an

Indian reservation some distance to the north. While he considered, Edgar broke in:

"As neither of us requires a pick-me-up, it might be better to leave the thing where it is."

"That," replied George, "is my own idea."

Edgar looked thoughtful.

"The case didn't come here by accident; and one wouldn't imagine that tonics are in great demand in this locality. I have, however, heard the liquor laws denounced; and as a rule it's wise to leave matters that don't concern you severely alone."

"Just so," said George. "We'll get on again, if you have had enough berries."

On reaching the homestead, they found a note from Miss Grant inviting them to come over in the evening; and both were glad to comply with it. When they arrived, the girl led them into a room where a lady of middle-age and a young man in clerical attire were sitting with her father.

"Mrs. Nelson has come over from Sage Butte on a mission," she said, when she presented them. "Mr. Hardie, who is the Methodist minister there, is anxious to meet you."

The lady was short and slight in figure but was marked by a most resolute expression.

"The mission is Mr. Hardie's," she said. "I'm merely his assistant. I suppose you're a temperance reformer, Mr. Lansing?"

"No," George answered meekly; "I can't say I am."

"Then you'll have to become one. How long is it since you indulged in drink?"

George felt a little embarrassed, but Edgar, seeing Flora's smile and the twinkle in her father's eyes, hastily came to his rescue.

"Nearly a month, to my knowledge. That is, if you don't object to strong green tea, consumed in large quantities."

"One should practise moderation in everything. *Everything!*"

"It has struck me," said Edgar thoughtfully, "that moderation is now and then desirable in temperance reform."

Mrs. Nelson fixed her eyes on him with a severe expression.

"Are you a scoffer?"

"No," said Edgar; "as a matter of fact, I'm open to conviction, especially if you intend to reform the Butte. In my opinion, it needs it."

"Well," responded the lady, "you're a signature, anyway; and we want as many as we can get. But we'll proceed to business. Will you state our views, Mr. Hardie?"

The man began quietly, and George was favorably impressed by him. He had a pleasant, sun-burned face, and a well-knit but rather thin figure, which suggested that he was accustomed to physical exertion. As he could not afford a horse, he made long rounds on foot to visit his scattered congregation, under scorching sun and in the stinging frost.

"There are four churches in Sage Butte, but I sometimes fear that most of the good they do is undone in the pool room and the saloons," he said. "Of the latter, one cannot, perhaps, strongly object to the Queen's."

"One should always object to a saloon," Mrs. Nelson corrected him.

Hardie smiled good-humoredly.

"After all, the other's the more pressing evil. There's no doubt about the unfortunate influence of the Sachem."

"That's so," Grant agreed. "When I first came out from Ontario, there wasn't a loafer in the town. When the boys were through with their day's job, they had a quiet talk and smoke and went to bed; they came here to work. Now the Sachem bar's full of slouchers every night, and quite a few of them don't do anything worth speaking of in the daytime, except make trouble for decent folks. If the boys try to put the screw on a farmer at harvest or when he has extra wheat to haul, you'll find they hatched the mischief at Beamish's saloon. But I've no use for giving those fellows tracts with warning pictures."

"That," said Mrs. Nelson, "is by no means what we intend to do."

"I'm afraid that admonition hasn't had much effect, and I agree with Mr. Grant that the Sachem is a gathering place for doubtful characters," Hardie went on. "What's worse, I've reasons for supposing that Beamish gets some of them to help him in supplying the Indians on the reservation with liquor."

This was a serious offense, and there was a pause, during which Edgar glanced meaningly at George. Then he made a pertinent remark.

"Four churches to two saloons is pretty long odds. Why do you think it needful to call in the farmers?"

Hardie looked troubled, but he showed that he was honest.

"The churches are thinly attended; I'm the only resident clergyman, and I'm sorry I must confess that some of our people are indifferent: reluctant, or perhaps half afraid, to interfere. They want a clear lead; if we could get a big determined meeting it might decide the waverers."

"Then you're not sure of winning?" asked Grant.

"No," replied Hardie. "There'll be strong and well-managed opposition; in fact, we have nearly everything against us. I've been urged to wait, but the evil's increasing; those against us are growing stronger."

"If you lose, you and your friends will find the Butte pretty hot. But you feel you have a chance, a fighting chance, and you mean to take it?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm with you," Grant declared with a grim smile. "Don't mistake me: I take my glass of lager when I feel like it — there's some right here in the house — but, if it's needful, I can do without. I'm not going into this thing to help you in preaching to whisky-tanks and toughs — it's the law I'm standing for. If what you suspect is going on, we'll soon have our colts rebranded and our calves missing. We have got to clean out Beamish's crowd."

"Thanks," said Hardie, with keen satisfaction.

He turned to George.

"I'd be glad of your support, Mr. Lansing."

George sat silent a moment or two while Flora watched him. Then he said quietly:

"My position's much the same as Mr. Grant's — I can do without. After what you have said about the Sachem, I'll join you."

"And you?" Hardie asked Edgar.

The lad laughed.

"I follow my leader. The loungers about the Sachem weren't civil to me; said unpleasant things about my appearance and my English clothes. To help to make them abstainers strikes me as a happy thought."

Flora glanced at him in amused reproof, and Hardie turned to Grant.

"What about your hired men?"

"Count them in; they go with me. If you have brought any memorial along, I'll see they sign it."

"I wish all our supporters had your determination," Mrs. Nelson remarked approvingly.

Hardie ventured a protest.

"I don't want any pressure put upon them, Mr. Grant."

"Pressure?" queried the farmer. "I'll just ask them to sign."

"I wonder if you're quite satisfied with the purity of all your allies' motives, Mr. Hardie?" Edgar inquired.

A smile crept into the clergyman's face.

"I don't think a leader's often in that position, Mr. West; and considering what I'm up against, I can't refuse any support that's offered me. It's one reason why I've taken yours."

"Now that I've joined you, I'd better mention a little discovery West and I made this afternoon," said George.

Hardie's expression grew eager as he listened.

"It's certainly liquor — for the reservation Indians," he broke out. "If we can fix the thing on

Beamish — I haven't a doubt that he's responsible — we can close the Sachem."

"Then we had better decide how it's to be done," Grant said curtly.

He ruled out several suggestions, and finally said:

"I expect the case will be sent for to-night, and we want two witnesses who'll lie by in the sloo. One of them ought to be a farmer; but we'll see about that. Guess your part is to find out how the liquor left the Butte, Mr. Hardie. What do you think of the plan, ma'am?"

"I leave it to you," said Mrs. Nelson, half reluctantly. "But be warned — if the men can't close the Sachem, the women of Sage Butte will undertake the thing."

"Then we have only to decide who is to watch the bluff," said Hardie.

"As I first mentioned the matter, I'll go, for one," George volunteered.

"You're the right man," declared Grant. "As a newcomer who's never been mixed up with local affairs, your word would carry more weight with the court. The opposition couldn't make you out a partizan. But you want to recognize what you're doing — after this, you'll find yourself up against all the Sachem toughs. It's quite likely they'll make trouble for you."

"I wonder whether such reasons count for much with Mr. Lansing?" Flora said suggestively.

George made no reply, but Edgar laughed.

"They don't, Miss Grant; you can set your mind at rest on that. You don't seem curious whether they count with me."

"You're not going," Grant told him. "We must have two men who can be relied on, and I can put my hand on another who's younger and a little more wiry than I am." He turned to George. "What you have to do is to lie close in the sloo grass until the fellows come for the liquor, when you'll follow them to the reservation, without their seeing you. Then you'll ride up and make sure you would know them again. They should get there soon after daylight, as they won't strike the bluff until it's dark, but there's thick brush in the ravine the trail follows for the last few miles. It won't matter if they light out, because Flett will pick up their trail. I'll send for him right off, but he could hardly get through before morning."

The party broke up shortly afterward, and George rode home, wondering why he had allowed himself to become involved in what might prove to be a troublesome matter. His ideas on the subject were not very clear, but he felt that Flora Grant had expected him to take a part. Then he had been impressed in Hardie's favor; the man was in earnest, ready to court popular hostility, but he was nevertheless genial and free from dogmatic narrow-mindedness. Behind all this, there was in George a detestation of vicious idleness and indulgence, and a respect for right and order. Since he had been warned that the badly-kept hotel sheltered a gang of loafers plotting mischief and willing to prey upon men who toiled strenuously, he was ready for an attempt to turn them out. He agreed with Grant: the gang must be put down.

CHAPTER X

THE LIQUOR-RUNNERS

DUSK was closing in when George and the hired man whom Grant had sent with him reached the bluff and tethered their horses where they would be hidden among the trees. This done, George stood still for a few moments, looking about. A dark, cloud-barred sky hung over the prairie, which was fast fading into dimness; the wood looked desolate and forbidding in the dying light. He did not think any one could have seen him and his companion enter it. Then he and the man floundered through the undergrowth until they reached the sloo, where they hid themselves among the grass at some distance from the case, which had not been removed.

There was no moon, and a fresh breeze swept through the wood, waking eerie sounds and sharp rustlings among the trees. Once or twice George started, imagining that somebody was creeping through the bushes behind him, but he was glad of the confused sounds, because they would cover his movements when the time for action came. His companion, a teamster born on the prairie, lay beside him amid the tall harsh grass that swayed to and fro with a curious dry clashing. He broke into a soft laugh when George suddenly raised his head.

"Only a cottontail hustling through the brush.

Whoever's coming will strike the bluff on the other side," he said. "Night's kind of wild; pity it won't rain. Crops on light soil are getting badly cut."

George glanced up at the patch of sky above the dark mass of trees. Black and threatening clouds drove across it; but during the past few weeks he had watched them roll up from the west a little after noon almost every day. For a while, they shadowed the prairie, promising the deluge he eagerly longed for; and then, toward evening, they cleared away, and pitiless sunshine once more scorched the plain. Grain grown upon the stiff black loam withstood the drought, but the light soil of the Marston farm was lifted by the wind, and the sharp sand in it abraded the tender stalks. It might cut them through if the dry weather and strong breeze continued; and then the crop which was to cover his first expenses would yield him nothing.

"Yes," he returned moodily. "It looks as if it couldn't rain. We ought to go in more for stock-raising; it's safer."

"Costs quite a pile to start with, and the ranchers farther west certainly have their troubles. We had a good many calves missing, and now and then prime steers driven off, when I was range-riding."

"I haven't heard of any cattle-stealing about here."

"No," said the teamster. "Still, I guess we may come to it; there are more toughs about the settlement than there used to be. Indians have been pretty good, but I've known them make lots of trouble in other districts by killing beasts for meat and picking up stray horses. But that was where they had mean whites willing to trade with them."

George considered this. It had struck him that the morality of the country had not improved since he had last visited it; though this was not surprising in view of the swarm of immigrants that were pouring in. Grant had pithily said that once upon a time the boys had come there to work; but it now looked as if a certain proportion had arrived on the prairie because nobody could tolerate them at home. Flett and the Methodist preacher seemed convinced that there were a number of these undesirables hanging about Sage Butte, ready for mischief.

"Well," he said, "I suppose the first thing to be done is to stop this liquor-running."

They had no further conversation for another hour. The poplars rustled behind them and the grass rippled and clashed, but now and then the breeze died away for a few moments, and there was a curious and almost disconcerting stillness. At last, in one of these intervals, the Canadian, partly rising, lifted his hand.

"Listen!" he said. "Guess I hear a team."

A low rhythmic drumming that suggested the beat of hoofs rose from the waste, but it was lost as the branches rattled and the long grass swayed noisily before a rush of breeze. George thought the sound had come from somewhere half a mile away.

"If they're Indians, would they bring a wagon?" he asked.

"It's quite likely. Some of the bucks keep smart teams; they do a little rough farming on the reservation. It would look as if they were going for sloo hay, if anybody saw them."

George waited in silence, wishing he could hear the thud of hoofs again. It was slightly daunting to lie

still and wonder where the men were. It is never very dark in summer on the western prairie, and George could see across the sloo, but there was no movement that the wind would not account for among the black trees that shut it in. Several minutes passed, and George looked around again with strained attention.

Suddenly a dim figure emerged from the gloom. Another followed it, but they made no sound that could be heard through the rustle of the leaves, and George felt his heart beat and his nerves tingle as he watched them flit, half seen, through the grass. Then one of the shadowy objects stooped, lifting something, and they went back as noiselessly as they had come. In a few more moments they had vanished, and the branches about them clashed in a rush of wind. It died away, and there was no sound or sign of human presence in all the silent wood. George, glad that the strain was over, was about to rise, but his companion laid a hand on his arm.

"Give 'em time to get clear. We don't want to come up until there's light enough to swear to them or they make the reservation."

They waited several minutes, and then, traversing the wood, found their horses and mounted. The grass stretched away, blurred and shadowy, and though they could see nothing that moved upon it, a beat of hoofs came softly back to them.

"Wind's bringing the sound," said the teamster. "Guess they won't hear us."

They rode out into the gray obscurity, losing the sound now and then. They had gone several leagues when they came to the edge of a dark bluff. Draw-

ing bridle, they sat and listened, until the teamster broke the silence.

"There's a trail runs through; we'll try it."

The trail was difficult to find and bad to follow, for long grass and willow-scrub partly covered it, and in spite of their caution the men made a good deal of noise. That, however, seemed of less importance, for they could hear nothing ahead, and George looked about carefully as they crossed a more open space. The trees were getting blacker and more distinct; he could see their tops clearly against the sky, and guessed that dawn was near. How far it was to the reservation he did not know, but there would be light enough in another hour to see the men who had carried off the liquor. Then he began to wonder where the latter were, for there was now no sign of them.

Suddenly, when the wind dropped for a moment, a faint rattle of wheels reached them from the depths of the wood, and the teamster raised his hand.

"Pretty close," he said. "Come on as cautious as you can. The reservation's not far away, and we don't want them to get there much before us."

They rode a little more slowly; but when the rattle of wheels and thud of hoofs grew sharply distinct in another lull, the man struck his horse.

"They've heard us!" he cried. "We've got to run them down!"

George urged his beast, and there was a crackle of brush about him as the black trees streamed past. The thrill of the pursuit possessed him; after weeks of patient labor, he felt the exhilaration of the wild night ride. The trail, he knew, was riddled here and there with gopher holes and partly grown with brush that

might bring his horse down, but this did not count. He was glad, however, that the teamster was behind him, because he could see the dim gap ahead between the mass of trees, and he thought that it was rapidly becoming less shadowy. The sound of hoofs and wheels was growing louder; they were coming up with the fugitives.

"Keep them on the run!" gasped the man behind. "If one of us gets thrown, the other fellow will hold right on!"

A few minutes later George's horse plunged with a crash through a break.

"We're off the trail!" his companion cried. "Guess it switches round a sloo!"

They floundered through crackling brushwood until they struck the track, and afterward rode furiously to make up the lost time, with the sound of wheels leading them on. Then in the gap before them they saw what seemed to be the back of a wagon which, to George's surprise, suddenly disappeared. The next moment a figure carrying something crossed the trail.

"To the right!" cried the teamster.

George did not think his companion had seen the man. He rode after him into the brush, and saw the fellow hurrying through it with a load in his arms. The man looked around. George could dimly make out his dark face; and his figure was almost clear. He was an Indian and unusually tall. Then he plunged into a screen of bushes, and George, riding savagely, drove his horse at the obstacle.

He heard the twigs snap beneath him, a drooping branch struck him hard; and then he gasped with horror. In front there opened up a deep black rift in

which appeared the tops of trees. Seeing it was too late to pull up, he shook his feet clear of the stirrups. He felt the horse plunge down, there was a shock, and he was flung violently from the saddle. He struck a precipitous slope and rolled down it, clutching at twigs, which broke, and grass, until he felt a violent blow on his head. After that he knew nothing.

It was broad daylight when consciousness returned, and he found himself lying half-way down a steep declivity. At the foot of it tall reeds and sedges indicated the presence of water, and he realized that he had fallen into a ravine. There was a small tree near by, against which he supposed he had struck his head; but somewhat to his astonishment he could not see his horse. It had apparently escaped better than he had, for he felt dizzy and shaky and averse to making an effort to get up, though he did not think he had broken any bones.

After a while he fumbled for his pipe and found some difficulty in lighting it, but he persevered, and lay quiet while he smoked it out. The sunlight was creeping down the gully, it was getting pleasantly warm, and George felt dull and lethargic. Some time had passed when he heard the teamster's shout and saw the man scrambling down the side of the ravine.

"Badly hurt?" he asked, on reaching George.

"No," said George; "I don't think it's serious; I feel half asleep and stupid. Suppose that's because I hit my head."

The other looked at him searchingly. His eyes were heavy and his face had lost its usual color.

"You want to get back to your homestead and lie quiet a while. I didn't miss you until I'd got out of the bluff, and then the wagon was close ahead."

"How was it you avoided falling in after me?"

"That's easy understood in the daylight. The trail twists sharply and runs along the edge of the ravine. I stuck to it; instead of turning, you went straight on."

"Yes," said George, and mentioned having seen the Indian who left the wagon. Then he asked: "But what about the fellow you followed?"

His companion hesitated.

"Guess I've been badly fooled. I came up with him outside the bluff when it was getting light, and he stopped his team. Said he was quietly driving home when he heard somebody riding after him, and as he'd once been roughly handled by mean whites, he tried to get away. Then as I didn't know what to do, I allowed I'd keep him in sight until Constable Flett turned up, and by and by we came to a deserted shack. There's a well in the bluff behind it, and the buck said his team wanted a drink; they certainly looked a bit played out, and my mare was thirsty. He found an old bucket and asked me to fill it."

"You didn't leave him with the horses!"

"No, sir; but what I did was most as foolish. I let him go and he didn't come back. See how I was fixed? If I'd gone into the bluff to look for him, he might have slipped out and driven off, so I stood by the beasts quite a while. It strikes me that team wasn't his. At last Flett rode up with another trooper. It seems Steve met them on the trail."

George nodded. Flett had arrived before he was

expected, because Grant's messenger had been saved a long ride to his station.

"Well?" he said.

"When we couldn't find the buck, Flett sent his partner off to pick up his trail, and then said we'd better take the team along and look for you. I left where the trail forks; he was to wait a bit. Now do you think you can get up?"

George did so, and managed with some assistance to climb the slope, where his companion left him and went off for the constable. Flett arrived presently, and made George tell his story.

"The thing's quite plain," he said. "The fellow you saw jumped off with the liquor, though one wouldn't expect him to carry it far. You say he was tall; did he walk a little lame?"

"It was too dark to tell. I'm inclined to think I would know him again."

"Well," explained Flett, "this is the kind of thing Little Ax is likely to have a hand in, and he's the tallest buck in the crowd. I'll stick to the team until we come across somebody who knows its owner. The first thing we have to do is to find that case of liquor."

Half an hour later the teamster came back carrying it, and set it down before the constable with a grin.

"Guess it's your duty to see what's in these bottles," he remarked. "Shall I get one out?"

"You needn't; I've a pretty good idea," answered Flett; adding meaningly, "besides, it's the kind of stuff a white man can't drink." Then he turned to George. "I'd better take you home. You look kind of shaky."

"What about my horse?" George asked.

"Guess he's made for home," said the teamster. "I struck his trail, and it led right out of the woods."

George got into the wagon with some trouble, and the teamster rode beside it when they set off.

"You haven't much to put before a court," he said to Flett.

"No," the constable replied thoughtfully. "I'm not sure our people will take this matter up; anyway, it looks as if we could only fix it on the Indians. This is what comes of you folks fooling things, instead of leaving them to us."

"The police certainly like a conviction," rejoined the teamster, grinning. "They feel real bad when the court lets a fellow off; seem to think that's their business. Guess it's why a few of their prisoners escape."

Flett ignored this, and the teamster turned to George.

"I'll tell you what once happened to me. I was working for a blamed hard boss, and it doesn't matter why I quit without getting my wages out of him, but he wasn't feeling good when I lit out behind a freight-car. By bad luck, there was a trooper handy when a train-hand found me at a lonely side-track. Well, that policeman didn't know what to do with me. It was quite a way to the nearest guard-room; they don't get medals for corraling a man who's only stolen a ride, and he had to watch out for some cattle rustlers; so wherever he went I had to go along with him. We got quite friendly, and one night he said to me, 'There's a freight that stops here nearly due. I'll go to sleep while you get out on her.'"

The teamster paused and added with a laugh:

"That's what I did, and I'd be mighty glad to set the drinks up if I ever meet that man off duty. We'd both have a full-size jag on before we quit."

"And you're one of the fellows who're running Hardie's temperance campaign!" Flett said dryly.

CHAPTER XI

DIPLOMACY

FLETT left the team at George's homestead. Bidding him take good care of it, and borrowing a fresh team, he drove away with the wagon. When he reached Sage Butte it was getting dusk. He hitched the horses outside of the better of the two hotels and entered in search of food, as he had still a long ride before him. Supper had long been finished, and Flett was kept waiting for some time, but he now and then glanced at the wagon. It was dark when he drove away, after seeing that the case lay where he had left it, and he had reached his post before he made a startling discovery. When he carried the case into the lamplight, it looked smaller, and on hastily opening it he found it was filled with soil!

He sat down and thought; though on the surface the matter was clear — he had been cleverly outwitted by somebody who had exchanged the case while he got his meal. This, as he reflected, was not the kind of thing for which a constable got promoted; but there were other points that required attention. The substitution had not been effected by anybody connected with the Queen's; it was, he suspected, the work of some of the frequenters of the Sachem; and he and his superiors had to contend with a well-

organized gang. News of what had happened in the bluff had obviously been transmitted to the settlement while he had rested at Lansing's homestead. He had, however, made a long journey, and as he would have to ride on and report the matter to his sergeant in the morning, he went to sleep.

The next day George was setting out on a visit to Grant when a man rode up and asked for the team.

"Flett can't get over, but he wants the horses at the post, so as to have them handy if he finds anybody who can recognize them," he explained.

That sounded plausible, but George hesitated. The animals would be of service as a clue to their owner and a proof of his complicity in the affair. As they had not been identified, it would embarrass the police if they were missing.

"I can only hand them over to a constable, unless you have brought a note from Flett," he replied.

"Then, as I haven't one, you'll beat me out of a day's pay, and make Flett mighty mad. Do you think he'd get anybody who might know the team to waste a day riding out to your place? Guess the folks round here are too busy, and they'd be glad of the excuse that it was so far. They won't want to mix themselves up in this thing."

George could find no fault with this reasoning, but he thought the fellow was a little too eager to secure the horses.

"Well," he said, "as I'm going to call on Mr. Grant, I'll see what he has to say. If I'm not back in time, Mr. West will give you supper."

"Then Grant's standing in with you and the temperance folks?"

It struck George that he had been incautious, but he could not determine whether the man had blundered or not. His question suggested some knowledge of the situation, but an accomplice of the offenders would, no doubt, have heard of the part Grant's hired man had played.

"I don't see how that concerns you," he replied. "You'll have to wait until I return if you want the team."

He rode on, but he had not gone far when he met Beamish, of the Sachem.

"I was coming over to see you," the man told him. "You bought that young Hereford bull of Broughton's, didn't you?"

George was surprised at the question, but he answered that he had done so.

"Then would you sell him?"

"I hadn't thought of it."

"Guess that means I'll have to tempt you," Beamish said. "I want the beast."

He named a price that struck George as being in excess of the animal's value; and then explained:

"I've seen him once or twice before he fell into Broughton's hands; the imported Red Rover strain is marked in him, and a friend of mine, who's going in for Herefords, told me not to stick at a few dollars if I could pick up such a bull."

This was plausible, but not altogether satisfactory, and George, reflecting that a buyer does not really praise what he means to purchase, imagined that there was something behind it.

"I'm not likely to get a better bid," he admitted. "But I must ask if the transaction would be com-

plete? Would you expect anything further from me in return?"

Beamish regarded him keenly, with a faint smile.

"Well," he said, "I certainly want the bull, but you seem to understand. Leave it at that; I'm offering to treat you pretty liberally."

"So as to prevent my assisting Flett in any way or taking a part in Hardie's campaign?"

"I wouldn't consider it the square thing for you to do," Beamish returned quietly.

George thought of the man who was waiting at the homestead for the team. It was obvious that an attempt was being made to buy him, and he strongly resented it.

"Then I can only tell you that I won't make this deal. That's the end of the matter."

Beamish nodded and started his horse, but he looked back as he rode off.

"Well," he called, in a meaning tone, "you may be sorry."

George rode on to Grant's homestead, and finding him at work in the fallow, told him what had passed.

"I fail to see why they're so eager to get hold of me," he concluded.

Grant, sitting in the saddle of the big plow, thoughtfully filled his pipe.

"Of course," he said, "it wasn't a coincidence that Beamish came over soon after the fellow turned up for the horses. It would have been worth while buying the bull if you had let them go — especially as I believe it's right about a friend of his wanting one — and nobody could have blamed you for selling. The fact is, your position counts. The bluff would

make a handy place for a depot, and, while there's nobody else near, you command the trails to it and the reservation. Nobody could get by from the settlement without being seen, unless they made a big round, if you watched out."

"I'm beginning to understand. What you say implies that they're doing a good trade."

"That's so," Grant assented. "I wouldn't have believed it was so big before Hardie put me on the track and I began to look around. But you want to remember that what you're doing may cost you something. I'm your nearest neighbor, you're running stock that are often out of sight, and you're up against a determined crowd."

"It's true," George admitted. "Still, I can't back out."

Grant cast a keen, approving glance at him. George sat quietly in his saddle with a smile on his brown face; his pose was easy but virile: there was a stamp of refinement and old country breeding upon him. His eyes were suggestively steady; his skin was clear; he looked forceful in an unemphatic manner. The farmer was to some extent prejudiced against the type, but he could make exceptions. He had liked Lansing from the beginning, and he knew that he could work.

"No," he said; "I guess you're not that kind of man. But won't you get down and go along to the house? Flora will be glad to talk with you, and I'll be in for supper soon."

George thanked him, and did as he suggested. He was beginning to find pleasure in the conversation of Flora Grant.

It was two hours later when he took his leave and the farmer went out with him.

"I don't know what Hardie's doing, but I've an idea that Mrs. Nelson means to make some move at the Farmers' Club fair," he said. "She's a mighty determined and enterprising woman. If you can spare the time, you'd better ride in and see what's going on."

On reaching home, George was not surprised to find that the man who had come for the horses had departed without waiting for his answer. The next day he received an intimation that the annual exhibition of the Sage Butte Farmers' Club would shortly be held; and one morning a fortnight later he and Edgar rode off to the settlement.

They found the little town rudely decorated with flags and arches of poplar boughs, and a good-humored crowd assembled. The one-sided street that faced the track was lined with buggies, wagons, and a few automobiles; horses and two or three yoke of oxen were tethered outside the overfull livery stables.

A strong breeze drove blinding dust-clouds through the place, but even in the wind the sunshine was scorching.

As he strolled toward the fair-ground, George became interested in the crowd. It was largely composed of small farmers, and almost without exception they and their wives were smartly attired; they looked contented and prosperous. Mingling with them were teamsters, many as neatly dressed as their masters, though some wore blue-jean and saffron-colored shirts; and there were railroad-hands, mechanics, and store-keepers. All of them were cheerful; a few

good years, free from harvest frost and blight, had made a marked improvement in everybody's lot.

Yet, there was another side to the picture. Odd groups of loungers indulged in scurrilous jests; hoarse laughter and an occasional angry uproar issued from the hotels, and shabby men with hard faces slouched about the veranda of one. George noticed this, but he presently reached the fair-ground, where he inspected the animals and implements; and then, toward supper-time, he strolled back with Grant. They were walking up one of the side-streets when shouts broke out behind them.

George looked around but for a moment he could see very little through the cloud of dust that swept the street. When it blew away it revealed a row of women advancing two by two along the plank sidewalk. They were of different ages and stations in life, but they all came on as if with a fixed purpose, and they had resolute faces. Mrs. Nelson led them, carrying a riding quirt, and though George was not astonished to see her, he started when he noticed Flora Grant near the end of the procession. She was paler than usual, and she walked quietly with a rather strained expression.

Grant touched George's shoulder.

"This is certainly more than I figured on," he said; "but I guess there's no use in my objecting. Now she's started, she'll go through with it. They're making for the Sachem; we had better go along."

Shortly afterward, a gathering crowd blocked the street.

"Speech!" somebody cried; and there was ironical applause.

Mrs. Nelson raised her hand, and when the procession stopped, she looked sternly at the men before her.

"No," she answered; "speeches are wasted on such folks; we're here to act!"

She waved the quirt commandingly.

"Let us pass!"

She was obeyed. The women moved on; and George and Grant managed to enter the hotel behind them before the throng closed in. The big general-room was hot and its atmosphere almost intolerably foul; the bar, which opened off it, was shadowy, and the crowded figures of lounging men showed dimly through thick cigar smoke. The hum of their voices died away and there was a curious silence as the women came in. Edging forward, George saw Beamish leaning on his counter, looking quietly self-possessed and very dapper in his white shirt and well-cut clothes.

"Well," he said, "what do you ladies want with me?"

Their leader faced him, a small and yet commanding figure, with an imperious expression and sparkling eyes.

"You got a notice that from supper-time this bar must be shut!"

"I did, ma'am. It was signed by you. Now, so far as I know, the magistrates are the only people who can close my hotel."

"That's so!" shouted somebody; and there were confused murmurs and harsh laughter which suggested that some of the loungers were not quite sober.

"Fire them out!" cried another man. "Guess this is why Nelson gets cold potatoes for his supper.

Ought to be at home mending socks or washing their men's clothes."

The lady turned sternly on the last speaker.

"Yes," she said; "that's the kind of idea you would hold. It's getting played out now."

George was conscious of slight amusement. The affair had its humorous side, and, though he was ready to interfere if the women were roughly handled, he did not think they ran any serious risk. Beamish looked capable of dealing with the situation.

"You don't require to butt in, boys," he said. "Leave me to talk to these ladies; I guess their intentions are good." He bowed to Mrs. Nelson. "You can go on, ma'am."

"I've only this to say — you must close your bar right now!"

"Suppose I'm not willing? It will mean a big loss to me."

"That," answered Mrs. Nelson firmly, "doesn't count; the bigger the loss, the better. You will stop the sale of drink until to-morrow, or take the consequences."

Another woman, who looked careworn and haggard, and was shabbily dressed, stood forward.

"We and the children have borne enough!" she broke out. "We have to save the cord-wood in the bitter cold; we have to send the kiddies out in old, thin clothes, while the money that would make home worth living in goes into your register. Where are the boys — our husbands and sons — who once held steady jobs and did good work?" She raised an accusing hand, with despair in her pinched face. "Oh! I needn't tell you — they're rebranding farmers' calves

or hiding from the police! Don't you know of one who walked to his death through the big trestle, dazed with liquor? For these things the men who tempted them will have to answer!"

"True, but not quite to the point," Mrs. Nelson interposed. "We have found remonstrance useless; the time for words has passed. This fellow has had his warning; we're waiting for him to comply with it."

There was an uproar outside from the crowd that was struggling to get in and demanding to be told what was going on; but Beamish made a sign of resignation.

"It looks as if I couldn't refuse you; and anyway it wouldn't be polite." He turned to his customers. "Boys, it's not my fault, but you'll get no more drinks to-day. For all that, I must make a point of asking you to treat these ladies with respect."

"Smart," Grant remarked to George. "He has handled the thing right. This means trouble for Hardie."

Then Beamish once more addressed the intruders.

"Now that I've given in, has it struck you that there isn't much use in closing my place if you leave the Queen's open?"

"We'll shut them both!" Mrs. Nelson declared.

"Then there's just another point — I've folks who have driven a long way, staying the night with me, and there's quite a crowd coming in for supper. How am I to treat them?"

"They can have all they want to eat," Mrs. Nelson told him graciously; "but no liquor."

"I can't refuse to supply them without a reason. What am I to say?"

"Tell them that the Women's Reform League has compelled you to close your bar."

"And I've been given the orders by their acknowledged secretary?"

"Yes. I'm proud of being their leader, and of the duty I've discharged."

Beamish turned to his customers.

"You'll remember what she has told me, boys!"

Grant drew George away.

"She walked right into the trap; you couldn't have stopped her. I'm sorry for Hardie. But we may as well get out now; there'll be no trouble."

The street was blocked when the women left, but a passage was made for them; and, followed by everybody in the settlement, they proceeded to the other hotel, whose proprietor capitulated. Then Mrs. Nelson made a speech, in which she pointed out that for once the festival would not be marked by the orgies which had on previous occasions disgraced the town. Her words, by no means conciliatory, and her aggressive air provoked the crowd, which had, for the most part, watched the proceedings with amusement. There were cries of indignant dissent, angry shouts, and the throng began to close in upon the speaker. Then there was sudden silence, and the concourse split apart. Into the gap rode a slim young man in khaki, with a wide hat of the same color, who pulled up and sat looking at the people with his hand on his hip. George recognized him as the constable who shared the extensive beat with Flett.

"Now," he said good-humoredly, "what's all this fuss about?"

Several of them informed him and he listened gravely before he called one of the farmer's stewards, and spoke a few words to him.

"It strikes me," he said, "that you had all better go back to the fair-ground, while I look into things. There's an item or two on the program Mr. Carson wants to work off before supper."

He had taken the right tone, and when they began to disperse he rode on to the Sachem.

"I want your account of this disturbance," he said to the proprietor.

Beamish related what had taken place and the constable looked surprised.

"Am I to understand that you're afraid to open your bar because of the women?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied Beamish, coolly; "that's about the size of it. You'd have been scared, too; they're a mighty determined crowd."

"Nobody except the authorities has any right to interfere."

"That's my opinion, but what am I to do about it? Suppose these women come back, will you stand at the door and keep them out? They're capable of mobbing you."

The constable looked dubious, and Beamish continued:

"Besides, I've given them my word I'd shut up — they made me."

"Then how do you expect us to help?"

"So far as I can see, you can only report the matter to your bosses."

The constable felt inclined to agree with this. He asked for the names of the ladies, and Beamish hesitated.

"I was too taken up with Mrs. Nelson to notice the rest, and the place was rather dark. Anyway, about half of them were foolish girls with notions; I don't want to drag them in."

"You blame somebody for setting them on?"

"I do," said Beamish, without a trace of rancor. "There's Mrs. Nelson — everybody knows she's a crank — and Hardie, the Methodist minister. They've been trying to make trouble for the hotels for quite a while."

The constable made a note of this and presently called on Hardie, who had just returned to town after visiting a sick farmer. The former listened to what the minister had to say, but was not much impressed. Beamish had cleverly made him his partizan.

After supper George and Grant called on Hardie and found him looking distressed.

"I'm much afraid that the result of three or four months' earnest work has been destroyed this afternoon," he said. "Our allies have stirred up popular prejudice against us. We'll meet with opposition whichever way we turn."

"There's something in that," Grant agreed. "Mrs. Nelson's a lady who would wreck any cause. Still, she has closed the hotels."

"For one night. As a result of this afternoon's work, they will probably be kept open altogether. You can imagine how the authorities will receive any representations we can make, after our being implicated in this disturbance."

"Have you thought of disowning the ladies? You could do so — you had no hand in the thing."

The young clergyman flushed hotly.

"I'd have stopped this rashness, if I'd heard of it; but, after all, I'm the real instigator, since I started the campaign. I'm willing to face my share of the blame."

"You mean you'll let Beamish make you responsible?"

"Of course," said Hardie. "I can't deny I'm leader. The move was a mistake, considered prudentially; but it was morally justifiable. I'll defend it as strongly as I'm able."

Grant nodded, and Flora and Mrs. Nelson came in.

"Are you satisfied with what you've done?" Grant said to the girl. "You might have given me a hint of it."

Flora smiled.

"I'm afraid Beamish was too clever for us. From an outsider's point of view, he behaved exceptionally well, and in doing so he put us in the wrong. I didn't know what had been planned when I left home, but, as one of the league, I couldn't draw back when I heard of it."

"You think he was too clever?" Mrs Nelson broke in. "How absurd to say that! We have won a brilliant victory!"

Grant made a little gesture.

"If you're convinced of that, ma'am, we'll leave you to talk it over."

He led George toward the door.

"I like that man Hardie," he resumed when they

reached the street. "Beamish has him beaten for the present, but I'm thankful there'll be no women about when we come to grips with his crowd. It may take a while, but those fellows have got to be downed."

CHAPTER XII

GEORGE FACES DISASTER

A FORTNIGHT had passed since the affair at the settlement when Hardie arrived at the Marston homestead toward supper-time. After the meal was over, he accompanied his host and Edgar to the little room used for an office.

"As I've been busy since four this morning, I don't mean to do anything more," said George. "I suppose you don't smoke?"

"No," Hardie answered. "It's a concession I can make without much effort to our stricter brethren. I'm inclined to believe they consider smoking almost as bad as drink. You agree with them about the latter?"

"We try to be consistent," Edgar told him. "You see, I couldn't very well indulge in an occasional drink when I've undertaken to make those Sage Butte fellows abstainers. Anyhow, though you're by no means liberal in your view, you're practical people. As soon as I landed at Montreal, a pleasant young man, wearing a silver monogram came up to me, and offered me introductions to people who might find me a job. Though I didn't want one, I was grateful; and when I told him I wasn't one of his flock, he said it didn't matter. That kind of thing makes a good impression."

"How are you getting on at the settlement?" George interposed.

Hardie sat silent for a few moments, and George saw that his eyes were anxious and his face looked worn.

"Badly," he said. "I feel I can talk to you freely, and that's really why I came, though I had another call to make."

"You're having trouble?"

"Plenty of it. I've had another visit from the police, though that's not a very important matter; and Mrs. Nelson's action has raised a storm of indignation. It would be useless to move any further against the Sachem. Even this is not the worst. Our people are split up by disagreements; I've been taken to task; my staunchest supporters are falling away."

"They'll rally," said George. "Leave those who haven't the courage to do so alone; you're better rid of them. I suppose it's apt to make a difference in your finances."

The clergyman colored.

"That's true, though it's hard to own. It subjects one to a strong temptation. After all, we're expected to keep our churches full — it's necessary."

"The road to success," Edgar remarked, "is comparatively easy. Always proclaim the popular view, but be a little more emphatic and go a little farther than the rest. Then they'll think you a genius and make haste to follow your lead."

Hardie looked at him quietly.

"There's another way, Mr. West, and the gate of it is narrow. I think it seldom leads to worldly fame." He paused and sighed. "It needs courage to enter, and one often shrinks."

"Well," said Edgar, "I'll confess that I find the popular idea, whatever it may happen to be, irritating; I like to annoy the people who hold it by pointing out their foolishness, which is partly why I'm now farming in western Canada. George, of course, is more altruistic; though I don't think he ever analyzes his feelings. As soon as he sees anybody in trouble and getting beaten, he begins to strip. I've a suspicion that he enjoys a fight!"

"If you would stop talking rot, we'd get on better," George said curtly, and then turned to his visitor. "I gather that you're afraid of wrecking your church. It's an awkward situation, but I suppose you have made up your mind?"

"Yes; I must go on, if I go alone."

The man, as the others recognized, had no intention of being dramatic, but his quiet announcement had its effect, and there was silence for a moment or two. Then Edgar, who was impatient of any display of strong feeling, made an abrupt movement.

"After all," he said cheerfully, "you'll have Mrs. Nelson beside you, and I'm inclined to think she would enliven any solitude."

Hardie smiled, and the lad continued:

"Now we had, perhaps, better be practical and consider how to get over the difficulties."

He grew less discursive when they fell in with his suggestion. George possessed sound sense and some power of leading, and for a while they were busy elaborating a plan of campaign, in which his advice was largely deferred to. Then there was an interruption, for Grierson, his hired man, came in.

"I was hauling hay from the big sloo when I saw

the Hereford bull," he said. "He was by himself and bleeding from the shoulder. Thought I'd better bring him home, though he walked very lame."

"Ah!" exclaimed George sharply. "I'll come and look at him."

The others followed and on reaching the wire-fenced corral they found the animal lying down, with its forequarter stained with blood. George sent for some water, and he soon found the wound, which was very small and round.

"It's a curious mark," Hardie commented.

"Yes," said George; "it's a bullet hole."

The surprise of the others was obvious.

"I think it's a hint," George explained. "We'll try to get him on his feet."

They succeeded, and when the beast had been led into a stall, George turned to Hardie.

"As you said you wouldn't stay the night, would you mind starting for the settlement now? The livery stable fellow is said to be clever at veterinary work; you might send him out, and mail a note I'll give you to the police."

Hardie professed his willingness to be of service, and on getting into his buggy said, with some hesitation:

"I'm afraid you're right in your suspicions, and I'm particularly sorry. In a way, I'm responsible for this."

George smiled, rather grimly.

"One can't go into a fight without getting hurt; and we haven't come to the end of it yet. This affair won't cost you my support."

The clergyman's eyes sparkled as he held out his hand.

"I never imagined it—you have my sympathy, Mr. Lansing. It would give me the greatest pleasure to see the cowardly brute who fired that shot brought to justice."

He drove away, and George went moodily back to the house with Edgar.

"That's a man who has had to choose between his duty and his interest," George said; "but just now we have other things to think about. It's a pity I can't get the bullet out until help arrives."

The livery man turned up on the following day and succeeded in extracting it; and Flett made his appearance the morning after. He examined the wounded animal.

"It may have been done by accident; but, if so, it's curious the beast should have been hit close to a place where it would have killed him," he remarked.

"What's your private opinion?" George asked.

The constable smiled.

"As we haven't gone very far yet, I'll reserve it." He took up the bullet. "Winchester or Marlin; usual caliber; nothing to be made of that. Now let's go and take a look at the place where the shot was fired."

They traced back the path of the wounded beast from the spot where Grierson had found it, by the red splashes that here and there stained the short grass of the unfenced prairie. At last they stopped where the ground was broken by a few low sandy ridges sprinkled with small birches and poplars, and Flett pointed to the mark of hoofs in a strip of almost bare, light soil.

"This is where he was hit," he said. "You can see

how he started off, going as hard as he could. Next, we've got to find the spot the man fired from."

It proved difficult. The dry grass revealed nothing, and they vainly searched several of the neighboring hillocks, where it grew less thickly. Scorching sunshine beat down on them and a strong breeze blew the sand about. At length Flett pointed to a few half-obliterated footprints on the bare summit of a small rise.

"The fellow stopped here with his feet well apart. He'd stand like that while he put up his gun. Sit down and smoke while I copy these marks."

He proceeded to do so carefully, having brought some paper from the homestead.

"Have you any reason for thinking it was a standing shot he took?" George asked.

"I haven't; I wish I had. Quite a lot depends upon his position."

George nodded.

"So it struck me. We'll look round for some more conclusive signs when you have finished."

Before this happened, Flora Grant rode up.

"I was going back from Forster's when I noticed you moving about the hills," she explained. "I made this round to find out what you were doing."

George told her, and her sympathy was obvious.

"I'm very sorry; but my father warned you," she said. "I'm afraid you're finding this an expensive campaign."

"I can put up with it, so long as I have my friends' support."

"I think you can count on that," she smiled. "But what is Flett's theory?"

"If he has one, he's clever at hiding it," Edgar broke in; "but I'm doubtful. In my opinion, he knows the value of the professional air of mystery."

"When I see any use in it, I can talk," retorted Flett. "What's your notion, Mr. Lansing? You don't agree that the fellow shot your beast from here?"

"No," answered George. "Of course, there are only two explanations of the thing, and the first is that it was an accident. In that case, the fellow must have been out after antelope or cranes."

"There's an objection: it's close season; though I wouldn't count too much on that. You farmers aren't particular when there's nobody around. Now, it's possible that a man who'd been creeping up on an antelope would work in behind this rise and take a quick shot, standing, when he reached the top of it. If so, I guess he'd have his eyes only on what he was firing at. Suppose he missed, and your beast happened to be in line with him?"

Flora smiled.

"It's not convincing, Mr. Flett. Seen from here, the bull would be in the open, conspicuous against white grass and sand."

"I didn't say the thing was likely. Won't you go on, Mr Lansing?"

"The other explanation is that the fellow meant to kill or mark the bull; the place where it was hit points to the former. If that was his intention, he'd lie down or kneel to get a steadier aim. We had better look for the spot."

They spent some time before Flett thought he had found it.

"Somebody lay down here, and the bull would be up against a background of poplar scrub," he said. "I'll measure off the distance and make a plan."

He counted his paces, and had set to work with his notebook, when Flora interrupted.

"Wouldn't a sketch be better? Give me a sheet of paper; and has anybody another pencil?"

George gave her one, and after walking up and down and standing for a few moments on a low mound, she chose a position and began the sketch. It was soon finished, but it depicted the scene with distinctness, with the bull standing in the open a little to one side of the clump of scrub. George started as he saw that she had roughly indicated the figure of a man lying upon the little mound with a rifle in his hand. It struck him that she was right.

"It's a picture," said the constable; "but why did you put that fellow yonder?"

"Come and see."

They followed her to the mound, and after an inspection of it, Flett nodded.

"You'd make a mighty smart tracker, Miss Grant. I was against this mound being the firing place, because, to get to it, the fellow would have to come out into the open."

"Would that count? It was a bull he was after."

"It was," Flett agreed. "This fixes the thing."

George looked at him meaningly.

"Have you made up your mind about anything else?"

"Oh, yes," said Flett. "It was done with malicious mischief. If a poor white or an Indian meant to kill a beast for meat, he wouldn't pick a bull worth a pile

of money, at least while there was common beef stock about."

"Then what do you mean to do?"

Flett smiled.

"Sooner or later, I'm going to put handcuffs on the man who did this thing. If you'll give me the sketch, Miss Grant, I'll take it along."

Flora handed it to him, and he and Edgar went away shortly afterward, leaving George with the girl. She sat still, looking down at him when he had helped her to the saddle.

"I'm afraid you have a good many difficulties to face," she said.

"Yes," assented George. "A dry summer is bad for wheat on my light soil, and that is why I thought of going in for stock." He paused with a rueful smile. "It doesn't promise to be a great improvement, if I'm to have my best beasts shot."

She pointed to the west. The grass about them was still scorched with fierce sunshine, but leaden cloud-masses, darkly rolled together with a curious bluish gleam in them, covered part of the sky.

"This time it will rain," she said. "We will be fortunate if we get no more than that. Try to remember, Mr. Lansing, that bad seasons are not the rule in western Canada, and one good one wipes out the results of several lean years."

Then she rode away, and George joined Edgar. He felt that he had been given a warning. On reaching home, he harnessed a team and drove off to a sloo to haul in hay, but while he worked he cast anxious glances at the clouds. They rolled on above him in an endless procession, opening out to emit a passing

blaze of sunshine, and closing in again. The horses were restless, he could hardly get them to stand; the grasses stirred and rustled in a curious manner; and even the little gophers that scurried away from the wagon wheels displayed an unusual and feverish activity. Yet there was not a drop of rain, and the man toiled on in savage impatience, wondering whether he must once more resign himself to see the promised deluge pass away.

It was a question of serious import. A night's heavy rain would consolidate the soil that blew about with every breeze, revive the suffering wheat and strengthen its abraded stalks against any further attack by the driving sand. Indeed, he thought it would place the crop in security.

He came home for supper, jaded, dusty, and morose, and found that he could scarcely eat when he sat down to the meal. He could not rest when it was over, though he was aching from heavy toil; nor could he fix his attention on any new task; and when dusk was getting near he strolled up and down before the homestead with Edgar. There was a change in the looks of the buildings — all that could be done had been effected — but there was also a change in the man. He was leaner, his face was getting thin, and he looked worn; but he maintained a forced tranquillity.

The sky was barred with cloud now; the great breadth of grain had faded to a leaden hue, the prairie to shadowy gray. The wind had dropped, the air was tense and still; a strange, impressive silence brooded over everything.

Presently Edgar looked up at the clouds.

"They must break at last," he said. "One can't help thinking of what they hold — endless carloads of grain, wads of dollar bills for the storekeepers, prosperity for three big provinces. It's much the same weather right along to the Rockies."

"I wasn't considering the three provinces," said George.

"No," retorted Edgar. "Your attention was confined to the improvement the rain would make in Sylvia Marston's affairs. You're looking forward to sending her a big check after harvest."

"So far, it has looked more like facing a big deficit."

"You mean your facing it."

George frowned.

"Sylvia has nothing except this land."

"It strikes me she's pretty fortunate, in one way. You find the working capital and bear the loss, if there is one. I wonder what arrangements you made about dividing a surplus."

"That," said George, "is a thing I've no intention of discussing with anybody but my co-trustee."

Edgar smiled; he had hardly expected to elicit much information upon the point, having failed to do so once or twice already.

"Well," he said, "I believe we'll see the rain before an hour has passed."

Soon after he had spoken, a flash leaped from overhead and the prairie was flooded with dazzling radiance. It was followed by a roll of thunder, and a roar as the rain came down. For a few moments the dust whirled up and there was a strong smell of earth; then the air was filled with falling water.

George stood still in the deluge, rejoicing, while the great drops lashed his upturned face, until Edgar laughingly pushed him toward the house.

"As I'm wet through, I think I'll go to bed. At last, you can rest content."

George, following his example, lay down with a deep sense of thankfulness. His cares had gone, the flood that roared against the board walls had banished them. Now that relief had come, he felt strangely weary, and in a few minutes he was sound asleep. He did not hear the thunder, which broke out again, nor feel the house shake in the rush of icy wind that suddenly followed; the ominous rattle on roof and walls, different from and sharper than the lashing of the rain, began and died away unnoticed by him. He was wrapped in the deep, healing slumber that follows the slackening of severe mental and bodily strain; he knew nothing of the banks of ragged ice-lumps that lay melting to lee of the building.

It was very cold the next morning, though the sun was rising above the edge of the scourged plain, when Edgar, partly dressed and wearing wet boots and leggings, came into the room and looked down at George compassionately.

The brown face struck him as looking worn; George had flung off part of the coverings, and there was something that suggested limp relaxation in his attitude; but Edgar knew that his comrade must bear his load again.

"George," he said, touching him, "you had better get up."

The man stirred, and looking at him became at once intent as he saw his face.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "Something else gone wrong?"

Edgar nodded.

"I'm sorry," he answered simply. "Put on your things and come out. You had better get it over with."

In three or four minutes George left the house. Holding himself steadily in hand, he walked through the drenched grass toward the wheat. On reaching it, he set his lips tight and stood very still. The great field of grain had gone; short, severed stalks, half-buried in a mass of rent and torn-up blades, covered the wide stretch of soil where the wheat had been. The crop had been utterly wiped out by the merciless hail. Edgar did not venture to speak; any sympathy he could express would have looked like mockery; and for a while there was strained silence. Then George showed of what tough fiber he was made.

"Well," he said, "it has to be faced. After this, we'll try another plan; more stock, for one thing." He paused and then resumed: "Tell Grierson to hurry breakfast. I must drive in to the Butte; there's a good deal to be done."

Edgar moved away, feeling relieved. George, instead of despairing, was considering new measures. He was far from beaten yet.

CHAPTER XIII

SYLVIA SEEKS AMUSEMENT

IT was a fine September afternoon and Sylvia reclined pensively in a canvas hammock on Herbert Lansing's lawn with one or two opened letters in her hand. Bright sunshine lay upon the grass, but it was pleasantly cool in the shadow of the big copper beech. A neighboring border glowed with autumn flowers: ribands of asters, spikes of crimson gladiolus, ranks of dahlias. Across the lawn a Virginia creeper draped the house with vivid tints. The scene had nothing of the grim bareness of the western prairie of which Sylvia was languidly thinking; her surroundings shone with strong color, and beyond them a peaceful English landscape stretched away. She could look out upon heavily-massed trees, yellow fields with sheaves in them, and the winding streak of a flashing river.

Yet Sylvia was far from satisfied. The valley was getting dull; she needed distraction, and her letters suggested both the means of getting it and a difficulty. She wore black, but it had an artistic, almost coquettish, effect, and the big hat became her well, in spite of its simple trimming. Sylvia bestowed a good deal of thought upon her appearance.

After a while Mrs. Lansing came out and joined her.

"Is there any news in your letters?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Sylvia; "there's one from George — it's a little disappointing, but you can read it. As usual, he's laconic."

George's curtness was accounted for by the fact that he had been afraid of saying too much, but Sylvia carelessly handed the letter to her companion.

"After all, he shows a nice feeling," Mrs. Lansing remarked. "He seems to regret very much his inability to send you a larger check."

"So do I," said Sylvia with a petulant air.

"He points out that it has been a bad season and he has lost his crop."

"Bad seasons are common in western Canada; I've met farmers who seemed to thrive on them."

"No doubt they didn't do so all at once."

"I dare say that's true," Sylvia agreed. "It's very likely that if I give him plenty of time, George will get everything right — he's one of the plodding, persistent people who generally succeed in the end — but what use will there be in that? I'm not growing younger — I want some enjoyment now!" She spread out her hands with a gesture that appealed for sympathy. "One gets so tired of petty economy and self-denial."

"But George and Herbert arranged that you should have a sufficient allowance."

"Sufficient," said Sylvia, "is a purely relative term. So much depends upon one's temperament, doesn't it? Perhaps I am a little extravagant, and that's why I'm disappointed."

"After all, you have very few necessary expenses."

Sylvia laughed.

"It's having only the necessary ones that makes it

so dull. Now, I've thought of going to stay a while with Susan Kettering; there's a letter from her, asking when I'll come."

Mrs. Lansing was a lady of strict conventional views, and she showed some disapproval.

"But you can hardly make visits yet!"

"I don't see why I can't visit Susan. She's a relative, and it isn't as if she were entertaining a number of people. She says she's very quiet; she has hardly asked anybody, only one or two intimate friends."

"She'll have three or four men down for the partridge shooting."

"After all," said Sylvia, "I can't make her send them away. You have once or twice had men from town here."

"Susan leads a very different life from mine," Mrs. Lansing persisted. "She's a little too fond of amusement, and I don't approve of all her friends." She paused as an idea struck her. "Is Captain Bland going there for the shooting?"

"I really can't tell you. Is there any reason why she shouldn't invite him?"

Mrs. Lansing would have preferred that Sylvia should not see so much of Bland as she was likely to do if she stayed in the same house with him, though she knew of nothing in particular to his discredit. He had served without distinction in two campaigns, he lived extravagantly, and was supposed to be something of a philanderer. Indeed, not long ago, an announcement of his engagement to a lady of station had been confidently expected; but the affair had, for some unknown reason, suddenly fallen through. Mrs. Lansing was puzzled about him. If the man were look-

ing for a wealthy wife, why should he be attracted, as she thought he was, by Sylvia, who had practically nothing.

"I'd really rather have you remain with us; but of course I can't object to your going," she said.

"I knew you would be nice about it," Sylvia exclaimed. "I must have a talk with Herbert; you said he would be home this evening."

Lansing's business occasionally prevented his nightly return from the nearest large town, but he arrived some hours later, and after dinner Sylvia found him in his smoking-room. He looked up with a smile when she came in, for their relations were generally pleasant. They understood each other, though this did not lead to mutual confidence or respect.

"Well?" he said.

Sylvia sat down in an easy chair, adopting, as she invariably did, a becoming pose, and handed him George's letter.

"He hasn't sent you very much," Herbert remarked.

"No," said Sylvia, "that's the difficulty."

"So I anticipated. You're not economical."

Sylvia laughed.

"I won't remind you of your failings. You have one virtue — you can be liberal when it suits you; and you're my trustee."

Lansing's rather fleshy, smooth-shaven face grew thoughtful, but Sylvia continued:

"I'm going to Susan's, and I really need a lot of new clothes."

"For a week or two's visit?"

"I may, perhaps, go on somewhere else afterward."

"I wonder whether you thought it necessary to tell Muriel so?"

Sylvia sighed.

"I'm afraid I didn't. I can hardly expect Muriel to quite understand or sympathize. She has you, and the flowers she's so fond of, and quiet friends of the kind she likes; while it's so different with me. Besides, I was never meant for retirement."

"That," laughed Lansing, "is very true."

"Of course," Sylvia went on; "I shall be very quiet, but there are things one really has to take part in."

"Bridge is expensive unless you're unusually lucky, or an excellent player," Lansing suggested. "However, it would be more to the purpose if you mentioned what is the least you could manage with."

Sylvia told him, and he knit his brows.

"Money's tight with me just now," he objected.

"You know it's only on account. George will do ever so much better next year; and I dare say, if I pressed him, he would send another remittance."

"His letter indicates that he'd find it difficult."

"George wouldn't mind that. He rather likes doing things that are hard, and it's comforting to think that self-denial doesn't cost him much. I'm thankful I have him to look after the farm."

Lansing regarded her with ironical amusement; he knew what her gratitude was worth.

"Yes," he agreed significantly, "George seldom expects anything for himself. I'm afraid I'm different in that respect."

Sylvia sat silent for a few moments, because she understood. If Herbert granted the favor, he would

look for something in return, though she had no idea what this would be. She was conscious of a certain hesitation, but she did not allow it to influence her.

"I don't doubt it," she rejoined with a smile. "Can't you let me have a check? That will make you my creditor, but I'm not afraid you'll be very exacting."

"Well," was the response, "I will see what I can do."

She went out and Lansing filled his pipe with a feeling of satisfaction. He was not running much risk in parting with the money, and Sylvia might prove useful by and by.

Sylvia left Brantholme shortly afterward and, somewhat to her annoyance, found Ethel West a guest at the house she visited. Ethel had known Dick; she was a friend of George's, and, no doubt, in regular communication with her brother in Canada. It was possible that she might allude to Sylvia's doings when she wrote; but there was some consolation in remembering that George was neither an imaginative nor a censorious person.

Sylvia had spent a delightful week in her new surroundings, when she descended the broad stairway one night with a shawl upon her arm and an elegantly bound little notebook in her hand. A handsome, dark-haired man whose bearing proclaimed him a soldier walked at her side. Bland's glance was quick and direct, but he had a genial smile and his manners were usually characterized by a humorous boldness. Still, it was difficult to find fault with them, and Sylvia had acquiesced in his rather marked preference for her

society. She was, however, studying the little book as she went down the shallow steps and her expression indicated dissatisfaction.

"I'm afraid it was my fault, though you had very bad luck," said the man, noticing her look. "I'm dreadfully sorry."

"It was your fault," Sylvia rejoined, with some petulance. "When I held my best hand I was deceived by your lead. Besides, as I told the others, I didn't mean to play; you shouldn't have come down and persuaded me."

Bland considered. On the whole Sylvia played a good game, but she was obviously a little out of practise, for his lead had really been the correct one, though she had not understood it. This, however, was of no consequence; it was her concluding words that occupied his attention. They had, he thought, been spoken with a full grasp of their significance; his companion was not likely to be guilty of any ill-considered admission.

"Then I'm flattered that my influence goes so far, though it's perhaps unlucky in the present instance," he said boldly. "I'll own that I'm responsible for our misfortunes and I'm ready to take the consequences. Please give me that book."

"No," Sylvia replied severely. "I feel guilty for playing at all, but the line must be drawn."

"Where do you feel inclined to draw it?"

They had reached the hall and Sylvia turned and looked at him directly, but with a trace of coquetry.

"At allowing a comparative stranger to meet my losses, if I must be blunt."

"The arrangement isn't altogether unusual. In this case, it's a duty, and the restriction you make doesn't bar me out. I'm not a stranger."

"A mere acquaintance then," said Sylvia.

"That won't do either. It doesn't apply to me."

"Then I'll have to alter the classification." She broke into a soft laugh. "It's difficult to think of a term to fit; would you like to suggest something?"

Several epithets occurred to the man, but he feared to make too rash a venture.

"Well," he said, "would you object to — confidential friend?"

Sylvia's smile seemed to taunt him.

"Certainly; it goes too far. One doesn't become a confidential friend in a very limited time."

"I've known it happen in a few days."

"Friendships of that kind don't last. In a little while you find you have been deceived. But we won't talk of these things. You can't have the book, and I'm going out."

He held up the shawl, which she draped about her shoulders, and they strolled on to the terrace. The night was calm and pleasantly cool; beyond the black line of hedge across the lawn, meadows and harvest fields, with rows of sheaves that cast dark shadows behind them, stretched away in the moonlight. After a while Sylvia stopped and leaned upon the broad-topped wall.

"It's really pretty," she remarked.

"Yes," returned Bland; "it's more than pretty. There's something in it that rests one. I sometimes wish I could live in such a place as this altogether."

Sylvia was astonished, because she saw he meant it.

"After your life, you would get horribly tired of it in three months."

"After my life? Do you know what that has been?"

"Race meetings, polo matches, hilarious mess dinners."

He laughed, rather shortly.

"I suppose so; but they're not the only army duties. Some of the rest are better, abroad; but they're frequently accompanied by semi-starvation, scorching heat or stinging cold, and fatigue; and it doesn't seem to be the rule that those who bear the heaviest strain are remembered when promotion comes."

Sylvia studied him attentively. Bland was well and powerfully made, and she liked big men — there was more satisfaction in bending them to her will. In spite of his careless good-humor, he bore a certain stamp of distinction; he was an excellent card-player, he could dance exceptionally well, and she had heard him spoken of as a first-class shot. It was unfortunate that these abilities were of less account in a military career than she had supposed; but, when properly applied, they carried their possessor some distance in other fields. What was as much to the purpose, Bland appeared to be wealthy, and took a leading part in social amusements and activities.

"I suppose that is the case," she said sympathetically, in answer to his last remark. "You have never told me anything about your last campaign. You were injured in it, were you not?"

The man had his weaknesses, but they did not include any desire to retail his exploits and sufferings to women's ears. He would not speak of his wounds,

honorably received, or of perils faced as carelessly as he had exposed his men.

"Yes," he answered. "But that was bad enough at the time, and the rest of it would make a rather monotonous tale."

"Surely not!" protested Sylvia. "The thrill and bustle of a campaign must be wonderfully exciting."

"The novelty of marching steadily in a blazing sun, drinking bad water, and shoveling trenches half the night, soon wears off," he said with a short laugh, and changed the subject. "One could imagine that you're not fond of quietness."

Sylvia shivered. The memory of her two years in Canada could not be banished. She looked back on them with something like horror.

"No," she declared; "I hate it! It's deadly to me."

"Well, I've an idea. There's the Dene Hall charity gymkana comes off in a few days. It's semi-private, and I know the people; in fact they've made me enter for some of the events. It's a pretty ride to the place, and I can get a good car. Will you come?"

"I don't know whether I ought," said Sylvia, with some hesitation.

"Think over it, anyway," he begged her.

One or two people came out, and when somebody called her name Sylvia left him, without promising. Bland remained leaning on the wall and thinking hard. Sylvia strongly attracted him. She was daintily pretty, quick of comprehension, and, in spite of her black attire, which at times gave her a forlorn air that made him compassionate, altogether charming. It was, however, unfortunate that he could not marry a poor wife, and he knew nothing about Sylvia's

means. To do him justice, he had shrunk from any attempt to obtain information on this point; but he felt that it would have to be made before things went too far. His thoughts were interrupted by Ethel West, who strolled along the terrace and stopped close at hand.

"I didn't expect to find you wrapped in contemplation," she remarked.

"As a matter of fact, I've been talking."

"To Mrs. Marston? She's generally considered entertaining."

Bland looked at her with a smile. He liked Ethel West. She was blunt, without being tactless, and her conversation was sometimes piquant. Moreover, he remembered that Ethel and Sylvia were old acquaintances.

"I find her so," he said. "Though she has obviously had trouble, she's very bright. It's a sign of courage."

"In Sylvia Marston's case, it's largely a reaction. She spent what she regards as two harrowing years in Canada."

"After all, Canada doesn't seem to be a bad place," said Bland. "Two of my friends, who left the Service, went out to take up land and they evidently like it. They got lots of shooting, and they've started a pack of hounds."

Ethel considered. She could have told him that Sylvia's husband had gone out to make a living, and had not been in a position to indulge in costly amusements, but this did not appear advisable.

"I don't think Marston got a great deal of sport," she said. "He had too much to do."

"A big place to look after? I understand it's wise to buy up all the land you can."

Ethel's idea of the man's views in respect to Sylvia was confirmed. He was obviously giving her a lead and she followed it, though she did not intend to enlighten him.

"Yes," she answered; "that's the opinion of my brother, who's farming there. He says values are bound to go up as the new railroads are built, and Marston had a good deal of land. Sylvia is prudently keeping every acre and farming as much as possible."

She saw this was satisfactory to Bland, and she had no hesitation in letting him conclude what he liked from it. It was not her part to caution him, and it was possible that if no other suitor appeared, Sylvia might fall back on George, which was a risk that must be avoided at any cost. Ethel did not expect to gain anything for herself; she knew that George had never had any love for her; but she was determined that he should not fall into Sylvia's hands. He was too fine a man, in many ways, to be thus sacrificed.

"But how can Mrs. Marston carry on the farm?" Bland inquired.

"I should have said her trustees are doing so," Ethel answered carelessly. "One of them went out to look into things not long ago."

Then she moved away and left Bland with one difficulty that had troubled him removed.

CHAPTER XIV

BLAND GETS ENTANGLED

WHEN Mrs. Kettering heard of Sylvia's intention to attend the gymkana, she gave her consent, and said that, as she had an invitation, she would make up a party to go. This was not what Bland required. It was, however, a four-seated car that he had been promised the use of; and counting Sylvia and himself and the driver, there was only one place left. While he was wondering to whom it would be best to offer it, Sylvia thought of Ethel West, who had announced that she would not attend the function. By making a short round, they could pass through a market town of some importance.

"You mentioned that you wished to buy some things; why not come with us?" she said to Ethel. "We could drop you going out and call for you coming home. Susan will have the big car full, so she couldn't take you, and it's a long drive to the station and the trains run awkwardly."

Sylvia's motive was easy to discern, but Ethel agreed. She was, on the whole, inclined to pity Captain Bland; but he was a stranger and George was a friend. If Sylvia must choose between them, it would be much better that she should take the soldier. For all that, Ethel had an uncomfortable feeling that she was assisting in a piece of treachery when she set

off soon after lunch on a fine autumn day; and the car had gone several miles before she began to enjoy the ride.

For a while the straight white road, climbing steadily, crossed a waste of moors. The dry grass gleamed gray and silver among the russet fern; rounded, white-edged clouds floated, scarcely moving, in a sky of softest blue. The upland air was gloriously fresh, and the speed exhilarating.

By and by they ran down into a narrow dale in the depths of which a river brawled among the stones, and climbed a long ascent, from which they could see a moving dust-cloud indicating that Mrs. Kettering's car was only a mile or two behind. After that there was a league of brown heath, and then they sped down to a wide, wooded valley, in the midst of which rose the gray walls of an ancient town. On reaching it, Ethel alighted in the market-square, hard by the lofty abbey, and turned to Bland.

"I have one or two calls to make after I've finished shopping, but if it takes longer than I expected or you can't get here in time, I'll go back by train," she said. "In that case, you must bring me home from the station."

Bland promised, and Ethel watched the car with a curious expression until it vanished under a time-worn archway. She was vexed with herself for playing into Sylvia's hands, though she had only done so in what she regarded as George's interest. If Sylvia married Bland, the blow would no doubt be a heavy one to George, but it would be better for him in the end.

In the meanwhile, the car sped on up the valley until

it reached an ancient house built on to a great square tower, where Bland was welcomed by a lady of high importance in the district. Afterward he was familiarly greeted by several of her guests, which Sylvia, who had strong ambitions, duly noticed; these people occupied a different station from the one in which she had hitherto moved. When Bland was called away from her, she was shown to a place at some distance from Mrs. Kettering's party, and she sat down and looked about with interest. From the smooth lawn and still glowing borders before the old gray house, a meadow ran down to the river that wandered, gleaming, through the valley, and beyond it the brown moors cut against the clear blue sky. In the meadow, a large, oval space was lined with groups of smartly-dressed people, and in its midst rose trim pavilions outside which grooms stood holding beautiful glossy horses. Everything was prettily arranged; the scene, with its air of gayety, appealed to Sylvia, and she enjoyed it keenly, though she was now and then conscious of her somber attire.

Then the entertainment began, and she admitted that Bland, finely-mounted, was admirable. He took his part in several competitions, and through them all displayed a genial good-humor and easy physical grace. He had for the most part younger men as antagonists, but Sylvia thought that none of them could compare with him in manner or bearing.

After a while Sylvia noticed with a start of surprise and annoyance that Herbert Lansing was strolling toward her. He took an unoccupied chair at her side.

"What brought you here?" she asked.

"That," he said, "is easily explained. I got a kind

of circular of invitation, and as I've had dealings with one or two of these people, I thought it advisable to make an appearance and pay my half-guinea. Then there's a man I want a talk with, and I find that the atmosphere of an office has often a deterrent effect on those unused to it. But I didn't expect to find you here."

"Susan and some of the others have come; I've no doubt you'll meet her."

The explanation appeared adequate on the face of it, but a moment later Herbert glanced at Bland, who was dexterously controlling his restive horse.

"The man looks well in the saddle, doesn't he?" he said.

"Yes," assented Sylvia in an indifferent tone, though she was slightly disturbed. Herbert was keen-witted, and she would rather not have had him take an interest in her affairs.

"I'm inclined to think it's fortunate I didn't bring Muriel," he resumed with a smile. "She's rather conventional, and has stricter views than seem to be general nowadays."

"I can't see why I should remain in complete seclusion; it's an irrational idea. But I've no intention of concealing anything I think fit to do."

"Of course not. Are you going to mention that you attended this entertainment when you write to Muriel?"

Sylvia pondered her reply. In spite of its dullness, Mrs. Lansing's house was a comfortable and secure retreat. She would have to go back to it presently, and it was desirable that she should avoid any cause of disagreement with her hostess.

"No," she said candidly; "I don't see any need for that; and I may not write for some time. Of course, Muriel doesn't quite look at things as I do, and on one or two points she's unusually sensitive."

Herbert looked amused.

"You're considerate; and I dare say you're right. There doesn't seem to be any reason why Muriel should concern herself about the thing, particularly as you're in Susan's hands."

The implied promise that he would not mention his having seen her afforded Sylvia some relief, but when he went away to speak to Mrs. Kettering, she wished she had not met him. Herbert was troubled by none of his wife's prejudices, but on another occasion he had made her feel that she owed him something for which he might expect some return, and now the impression was more marked; their secret, though of no importance, had strengthened his position. Herbert seldom granted a favor without an end in view; and she did not wish him to get too firm a hold on her. The feeling, however, wore off, and she had spent a pleasant afternoon when Bland came for her as the shadows lengthened.

He reminded her of Ethel:

"We'll have to get off, if we're to pick up Miss West."

Sylvia said that she was ready, though she felt it would have been more satisfactory had Ethel been allowed to go back by train. They began the journey, but after a few miles the car stopped on a steep rise. The driver with some trouble started the engine, but soon after they had crossed the crest of the hill it stopped again, and he looked grave as he supplied

Bland with some details that Sylvia found unintelligible.

"You must get her along another mile; then you can go back on a bicycle for what you want," Bland told him, and turned to Sylvia. "We'll be delayed for an hour or so, but he can leave word for Miss West, and there's an inn not far off where they'll give us tea while we're waiting."

They reached it after turning into another road, though the car made alarming noises during the journey. Sylvia viewed the old building with appreciation. It stood, long and low and cleanly white-washed, on the brink of a deep ghyll filled with lichened boulders and russet ferns, with a firwood close behind it, and in front a wide vista of moors and fells that stood out darkly blue against the evening light. Near the stone porch, a rustic table stood beside a row of tall red hollyhocks.

"It's a charming spot," Sylvia exclaimed. "Can't we have tea outside?"

Bland ordered it and they sat down to a neatly-served meal. The evening was warm and very still and clear. A rattle of wheels reached them from somewhere far down the road and they could hear the faint splash of water in the depths of the ravine.

"This is really delightful," murmured Sylvia, when the table had been cleared. "I like the quietness of the country when it comes as a contrast, after, for example, such an afternoon as we have spent."

"Then you're not sorry you came?"

"Sorry? You wouldn't suggest it, if you knew how dull my days often are. But I mustn't be doleful. You may smoke, if you like."

Bland did not particularly wish to smoke, but he lighted a cigarette. It seemed to banish formality, to place them on more familiar terms.

"What is the matter with the car?" Sylvia asked.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you. It can't be got along without something the man has gone back for."

"They do stop sometimes. Is this one in the habit of doing so?"

"I can't say, as it isn't mine. Why do you ask?"

"Oh!" said Sylvia, "I had my suspicions. The man didn't seem in the least astonished or annoyed, for one thing. Then it broke down in such a convenient place."

Bland laughed; her boldness appealed to him.

"Well," he declared, "I'm perfectly innocent; though I can't pretend I'm sorry."

"You felt you had to say that."

"No," he declared, with a direct glance; "I meant it."

Sylvia leaned back in her chair and glanced appreciatively at the moor.

"After all," she said, "it's remarkably pretty here, and a change is nice. I'll confess that I find Susan's friends a little boring."

The implication was that she preferred Bland's society, and he was gratified.

"That struck me some time ago," he rejoined. "I wonder if you can guess why I thought it worth while to put up with them?"

Sylvia smiled as she looked at him. She liked the man; she thought that he had a good deal she valued to offer her; but as yet she desired only his captivation. She must not allow him to go too far.

"You might have had a number of motives," she said carelessly. "I don't feel much curiosity about them."

Bland bore the rebuff good-humoredly. Patience was one of his strong points, and since his conversation with Ethel West on the terrace he had made up his mind. In arriving at a decision, the man was honest and ready to make some sacrifice. He had been strongly impressed by Sylvia on their first meeting, but he had realized that it would be a mistake to marry her unless she had some means. Hitherto he had found it difficult to meet his expenses, which were large. He did not believe now that Sylvia was rich, and he had seen enough of her to suspect that she was extravagant, but this did not deter him. She had undoubtedly some possessions, and he was prepared to retrench and deny himself a number of costly pleasures. Indeed, he had once or twice thought of leaving the army.

"Then I won't force an explanation on you," he said, and lighting another cigarette, lazily watched her and tried to analyze her charm.

He failed to do so. Sylvia was a born coquette, and most dangerous in that her power of attraction was natural, and as a rule she appealed to the better and more chivalrous feelings of her victims. Fragile, and delicately pretty, she looked as if she needed some one to shelter and defend her from all troubles. Bland decided that, although she rarely said anything brilliant, and he had seen more beautiful women, he had not met one who, taken all round, could compare with Sylvia.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked at length, with a gleam of mischief in her eyes.

"Oh," he answered, slightly confused, "my mind was wandering. I believe I was trying to explain a thing that's wrapped in impenetrable mystery."

"One wouldn't have imagined you were given to that kind of amusement, and it's obviously a waste of time. Wouldn't it be wiser to accept the object that puzzles you for what it seems, if it's nice?"

"It is," he declared, wondering whether this was a random shot on her part or one of the flashes of penetration with which she sometimes surprised him. "Your advice is good."

"I believe so," responded Sylvia. "If a thing pleases you, don't try to find out too much about it. That's the way to disappointment."

She was a little astonished at his reply.

"Perhaps it's a deserved penalty. One should respect a beautiful mystery — unquestioning faith is a power. It reacts upon its object as well as upon its possessor."

"Even if it's mistaken?"

"It couldn't be altogether so," Bland objected. "Nothing that was unworthy could inspire real devotion."

"All this is far too serious," said Sylvia, petulantly; for her companion's moralizing had awakened a train of unpleasant reflections.

She did not think unquestioning faith was common, but she knew of one man who was endowed with it, and he was toiling for her sake on the desolate western prairie. Once or twice his belief in her had roused

angry compunction, and she had revealed the more unfavorable aspects of her character, but he had refused to see them.

"Then what shall we talk about?" Bland inquired.

"Anything that doesn't tax one's brain severely. Yourself, for example."

"I'm not sure that's flattering, and it's an indifferent topic; but I won't back out. As I gave you your choice, I must take the consequences."

"Are you always ready to do that?" There was a tiny hint of seriousness in her voice.

"Well," he said with some dryness, "I generally try."

There was something that reminded her of George in his expression. The man, she thought, would redeem what pledge he gave; he might be guilty of rashness, but he would not slink away when the reckoning came. Then she became conscious of a half-tender regret. It was a pity that George was so fond of the background, and left it only when he was needed, while Brand was a prominent figure wherever he went, and this was, perhaps, the one of his characteristics which most impressed her. Then he rather modestly began the brief account of his career, adding scraps of information about his relatives, who were people of station. He did not enlarge upon several points that were in his favor, but he omitted to state that he had now and then been on the verge of a financial crisis.

Sylvia listened with keen interest, and asked a few questions to help him on; but when he finished she let the subject drop. Soon afterward she glanced down the road, which was growing dim.

"I wish your man would come. It's getting late," she said.

"He can't be much longer. I don't think you need be disturbed."

"I am disturbed," Sylvia declared. "I really shouldn't have come to-day; you will remember I hesitated."

"Then it was a temptation?"

Sylvia smiled rather wistfully. "That must be confessed; I need a little stir and brightness and I so seldom get it. You know Muriel; I owe her a good deal, but she's so dull and she makes you feel that everything you like to do is wrong."

"But you haven't been very long with Mrs. Lansing. Wasn't it different in Canada?" Bland had a reason for venturing on the question, though it was rather a delicate one.

"I can hardly bear to think of it! For four months in the year I was shut up, half-frozen, in a desolate homestead. There was deep snow all round the place; nobody came. It was a day's drive to a forlorn settlement; nothing ever broke the dreary monotony. In summer one got worn out with the heat and the endless petty troubles. There was not a moment's rest; the house was filled with plowmen and harvesters, uncouth barbarians who ate at our table and must be waited on."

Bland was moved to pity; but he was also consoled. As she had not mentioned Marston, she could not greatly have felt his loss. Sylvia must have married young; no doubt, before she knew her mind.

"I wish," he said quietly, "I could do something to make your life a little brighter."

"But you can't. I've had one happy day — and I'm grateful. It must last me a while."

He leaned forward, looking at her with an intent expression.

"Sylvia, give me the right to try."

She shrank from him with a start that was partly natural, for she was not quite prepared for a bold avowal.

"No," she said in alarm. "How can I do that?"

"Don't you understand me, Sylvia? I want the right to take care of you."

She checked him with a gesture.

"It is you who can't understand. Do you think I'm heartless?"

"Nothing could make me think hardly of you," he declared.

"Then show me some respect and consideration. It was what I looked for; I felt I was safe with you."

Though he had not expected strong opposition, he saw that she was determined. He had been too precipitate, and while he had no idea of abandoning his purpose, he bowed.

"If I've offended, you must forgive me — I thought of nothing beyond my longing for you. That won't change or diminish, but I've been rash and have startled you. I must wait."

He watched her in keen anxiety, but Sylvia gave no hint of her feelings. As a matter of fact, she was wondering why she had checked and repulsed him. She could not tell. A sudden impulse had swayed her, but she was not sorry she had yielded to it. Her hold on the man was as strong as ever; the affair was not ended.

There was silence for the next few minutes. It was growing dark; the hills had faded to blurs of shadows, and the moor ran back, a vast, dim waste. Then a twinkling light moved toward them up the ascending road. Bland rose and pointed to it.

"I dare say the man has got the things he needed. We'll be off again shortly," he said in his usual manner; and Sylvia was grateful.

In another half-hour the car was ready, and when Bland helped Sylvia in and wrapped the furs about her, there was something new in his care for her comfort. It was a kind of proprietary gentleness which she did not resent. Then they sped away across the dusky moor.

CHAPTER XV

HERBERT MAKES A CLAIM

SYLVIA finished her round of visits in a state approaching insolvency. Mrs. Kettering, with whom she stayed some time, indulged in expensive amusements, and though she would have listened with good-humor to a plea of poverty, Sylvia declined to make it. She would not have Bland suspect the state of her affairs, and while he remained in the house she took her part in all that went on, which included card-playing for high stakes. As it happened, she had a steady run of misfortune. Bland sympathized with her and occasionally ventured a remonstrance, but she could see that the cheerful manner in which she faced her losses had its effect on him.

On the evening of her return, Herbert was strolling along the platform at a busy junction, in the gathering dusk, when he noticed Bland speaking to a porter. Soon afterward, Bland came toward him, and Herbert asked him if he were staying in the neighborhood.

"No," said Bland; "I'm passing through; only been here half an hour. We're probably on the same errand."

"I came to meet Mrs. Marston," Herbert told him.

"And I broke my journey to town with the idea of being of some assistance when she changed."

"They don't give one much time here, and it's an awkward station," Herbert said, with a careless air.

It struck him that Sylvia's acquaintance with the man must have ripened rapidly, for he was well informed of her movements; but this was no concern of his. He had thought for some time that a match between her and George would be unsuitable. For a while he and Bland talked about indifferent matters, and then the latter turned to him with a smile.

"I was very lucky at a small steeplechase," he said. "Backed a rank outsider that only a few friends of mine believed in. Do you know of anything that's bound to go up on the Stock Exchange? It's in your line, I think."

"I don't. Such stocks are remarkably scarce. If there's any strong reason for a rise in value, buyers anticipate it."

"Then perhaps you know of something that has a better chance than the rest? I expect your tip's worth having."

"You might try — rubber!"

"Rubber? Hasn't that been a little overdone?"

Herbert considered, for this remark confirmed his private opinion. Rubber shares had been in strong demand, but he thought they would not continue in general favor. The suggestion made by an outsider might be supposed to express the view held by small speculators, which had its effect on the market.

"I gave you my idea, but I can't guarantee success," he said. "You must use your judgment, and don't blame me if things go wrong."

"Of course not; the risk's mine," returned Bland; and Herbert thought he meant to follow his advice.

A few minutes later, the train which they were waiting for came in, and Herbert tactfully stood aside when Bland helped Sylvia to alight. Watching her face, he concluded by the absence of any sign of surprise that the meeting had been arranged. Bland, however, had little opportunity for conversation amid the bustle; and the train was on the point of starting before Sylvia saw Herbert. He got in as it was moving, and she looked at him sharply.

"I didn't expect you would meet me."

"So I supposed," he told her.

"Oh, well," she said, smiling, "you might have been useful."

Herbert thought she might have thanked him for coming, considering that he had, by his wife's orders, made an inconvenient journey; but gratitude was not one of Sylvia's virtues.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" he asked.

"Yes, on the whole, but I've been dreadfully unlucky. In fact, I'm threatened by a financial crisis."

Herbert made a rueful grimace.

"I know what that means; I'm getting used to it. But we'll talk the matter over another time. I suppose I'm neglecting my duties; I ought to lecture you."

"Isn't Muriel capable of doing all that's necessary in that line?"

"She's hampered by not knowing as much as I do," Herbert retorted with a meaning smile.

Nothing of moment passed between them during the rest of the journey, but some time after they reached home Herbert turned to Sylvia, who was sitting near him, in the absence of his wife.

"You're short of funds again?" he asked.

Sylvia explained her embarrassments, and Herbert looked thoughtful.

"So," he said, "you have spent what George sent, as well as what I advanced you in anticipation of his next remittance. This can't go on, you know."

"I'll be very economical for the next few months," Sylvia promised penitently.

"If you're not, you'll find very stern economy imperative during those that follow; but I'll let you have a small check before I leave."

Sylvia thanked him and they talked about other matters for a while. Then he said carelessly:

"There's a favor you could do me. It won't cost you any trouble. A young man is coming down here next week, and I want you to be as pleasant as you can and make him enjoy his visit. I'm inclined to think he'll appreciate any little attention you can show him."

"The last's a cheap compliment," Sylvia rejoined. "Aren't you asking me to undertake your wife's duty?"

Herbert smiled.

"Not altogether. Muriel's an excellent hostess; she will do her part, but I want you to assist her. You have exceptional and rather dangerous gifts."

"Don't go too far," Sylvia warned him. "But I'd better understand the situation. How long do you expect me to be amiable to the man?"

"Only for a couple of days. He might come down again, but that's not certain."

Sylvia considered, for she saw what Herbert required. She was to exert her powers of fascination

upon the visitor, in order to make him more pliable in his host's hands. The task was not a disagreeable one, and she had foreseen all along that Herbert, in indulging her in various ways, would look for some return.

"After all," she said, "there's no reason why I should be ungracious to him, so long as he's pleasant."

Herbert carelessly nodded agreement, but Sylvia knew that he expected her to carry out his wishes; and she did not find it difficult when the guest arrived.

Paul Singleton was young, and perhaps unusually susceptible to the influences brought to bear upon him during his visit. Born with some talents, in very humble station, he had by means of scholarships obtained an excellent education, and had devoted himself in particular to the study of botany. A prosperous man who took an interest in him sent him out to a tropical plantation, where he wrote a work on the vegetable product of equatorial regions, which secured him notice. Indeed, he was beginning to make his mark as an authority on the subject. So far, however, his life had been one of economy and self-denial, and although Lansing's dwelling was not characterized by any very marked signs of culture or luxury, it was different from the surroundings to which Singleton was accustomed. His hostess was staidly cordial and at once set him at his ease; Sylvia was a revelation. Her piquant prettiness and her charm of manner dazzled him. She played her part well, not merely because she had agreed to do so, but because it was one that strongly appealed to her nature.

On the second evening of Singleton's visit, he was talking to Sylvia rather confidentially in the drawing-room, where Mrs. Lansing had left them, while Herbert was seated at a table in his library with a cigar in his hand and a litter of papers in front of him. He was thinking hard, and rubber occupied the foremost place in his mind. He was a director of a company, formed to exploit a strip of rubber-bearing territory in the tropics, which had hitherto been successful; but he felt that it was time to retire from the position and realize the profit on his shares. There was another company he and some associates had arranged to launch, but he was now very doubtful whether this would be wise. Rubber exploitations were overdone; there were signs that investors were losing their confidence. Withdrawal, however, was difficult, for it must be quietly effected without breaking prices by any unusual sales. It was therefore desirable that other holders should cling to their shares, and any fresh buying by outsiders would, of course, be so much the better. This was one reason why he had suggested a purchase to Bland.

Opening a book, he noted the amount of stock standing in George's name. This had been purchased by Herbert, who had been given such authority by his cousin at a time when the directors' position needed strengthening, though it had been necessary to dispose of sound shares, yielding a small return. The prompt sale of this stock would secure George a moderate profit, but after some consideration Herbert decided that it should remain. He had no wish that George should suffer, but his own interests stood first. Then he carefully studied several sheets of figures, which

confirmed his opinion that a drop in the value of the stock he owned might be looked for shortly, though he thought very few people realized this yet. It was time for effective but cautious action. He must unload as soon as possible.

By and by he rang a bell, and passed across the cigar box when Singleton came in and sat down opposite him. He was a wiry, dark-haired man with an intelligent face which had grown rather white and haggard in the tropics. Just now he felt grateful to his host, who had made his stay very pleasant and had given him an opportunity for meeting Sylvia.

"I suppose you have read my report on your new tropical property?" he said.

"Yes," answered Herbert, picking up a lengthy document. "I've given it some thought. On the whole, it isn't optimistic."

Singleton pondered this. He had learned a little about company floating, and was willing to oblige his host as far as he honestly could. Lansing had enabled him to undertake a search for some rare examples of tropical flora by paying him a handsome fee for the report.

"Well," he said, "there is some good rubber in your territory, as I have stated."

"But not readily accessible?"

"I'm afraid I can't say it is."

Herbert smiled at him.

"I'm not suggesting such a course. In asking a man of your character and attainments to investigate, I was prompted by the desire to get a reliable report."

Singleton did not know what to make of this; so far

as his experience went, gentlemen who paid for an opinion on the property they meant to dispose of did not want an unfavorable one.

"The rubber's scattered and grows in awkward places," he explained.

"Precisely." Herbert glanced at the paper. "You mentioned something of the kind. But what about planting and systematic cultivation?"

"Soil and climate are eminently suitable."

"I gather that there's a difficulty in the way of obtaining native labor?"

Singleton broke into a grim smile.

"It's a serious one. The natives consider strangers as their lawful prey, and they lately managed to give a strong punitive expedition a good deal of trouble. In fact, as they're in a rather restless mood, the authorities were very dubious about letting me go inland, and in spite of the care I took, they got two of my colored carriers. Shot them with little poisoned arrows."

"Ah!" ejaculated Herbert. "Poisoned arrows? That should have a deterrent effect."

"Singularly so. A slight prick is enough to wipe you out within an hour. It's merciful the time is so short."

"That," said Herbert, "was not quite what I meant. I was thinking of the effect upon the gentlemen who wish to launch this company."

"The risk isn't attached to their end of the business," Singleton dryly pointed out.

Herbert did not answer. While he sat, with knitted brows, turning over some of the papers in front of him, Singleton looked about. Hitherto his life had

been spent in comfortless and shabby English lodgings, in the sour steam of tropic swamps, and in galvanized iron factories that were filled all day with an intolerable heat. As a result of this, his host's library impressed him. It was spacious and furnished in excellent taste; a shaded silver lamp stood on the table, diffusing a restricted light that made the room look larger; a clear wood fire burned in the grate. The effect of all he saw was tranquilizing; and the house as a whole, inhabited, as it was, by two charming, cultured women, struck him as a delightful place of rest. He wondered with longing whether he would have an opportunity for coming back to it.

Then his host looked up.

"Have you any strong objections to recasting this report?" he asked. "Don't mistake me. I'm not asking you to color things in any way; I want simple facts. After what you have told me, I can't consider the prospects of our working the concessions very favorable."

Singleton was surprised; Lansing's attitude was puzzling, considering that he had suggested the flotation of the projected company.

"Do you want the drawbacks insisted on?" he asked.

Herbert smiled.

"I don't want them mitigated; state them clearly. Include what you told me about the trouble with the natives, and the poisoned arrows."

Then a light broke in upon Singleton. He had not placed his host in the same category with Mrs. Lansing and Sylvia. It looked as if he had changed his

plans and wished to prevent the company from being formed. This caused Singleton to consider how far he would be justified in assisting him. He could honestly go some length in doing so, and, having fallen a victim to Sylvia's charm, he was willing to do his utmost.

"There's no doubt that some of the facts are discouraging," he said.

Herbert looked at him keenly.

"That is what struck me. Suppose you think the thing over and bring me down a fresh report a week from to-day. Stay a day or two, if you're not busy; I can get you some shooting, and we can talk over any points that seem to require it at leisure."

Singleton sat silent a moment. He wanted to come back, and he did not believe the concession could be profitably worked by any usual methods. For all that, he thought he could make something of the property; it was not altogether worthless, though it would require exceptional treatment.

"Perhaps that would be better," he replied. "I should be delighted to make another visit."

Herbert took up the paper and looked at Singleton with a smile as he flung it into the fire.

"Now I think we'll go down," he said. "Mrs. Lansing will be waiting for us."

Singleton spent the remainder of the evening with great content, talking to Sylvia. When she left him, Herbert met her in the hall.

"Thanks," he smiled meaningly. "Did you find the man interesting?"

"To some extent," returned Sylvia; "he's a type

that's new to me. Still, of course, he's a little raw, and inclined to be serious. I think one could see too much of him."

"He's coming down again in a week."

"Oh!" said Sylvia, with signs of protest. "And after that?"

Herbert laughed.

"I don't think he'll make a third visit."

CHAPTER XVI

A FORCED RETIREMENT

SINGLETON came down again to Brantholme, bringing his amended report, which met with Herbert's approval. He spent one wet day walking through turnip fields and stubble in search of partridges, and two delightful evenings with Mrs. Lansing and Sylvia, and then he was allowed to depart. He had served his purpose, and Herbert was glad to get rid of him. Lansing generally found it desirable to drop men for whom he had no more use; but he had not done with Singleton.

A day or two later, after his guest had left, Herbert sat in his office in a busy town with an open ledger in front of him. He looked thoughtful, and, as a matter of fact, he was reviewing the latter part of his business career, which had been marked by risks, boldly faced, but attended by keen anxiety. Though his wife had some money, Lansing had been hampered by lack of capital, and George's money had been placed at his disposal at a very opportune time. It had enabled him to carry the rubber company over what might have proved a crisis, and thus strengthen his position as director, by purchasing sufficient shares on George's account to keep the price from falling and defeat the intrigues of a clique of discontented investors. Now, however, the strain had slackened; Herbert's schemes

had succeeded, and he had only to take his profit by selling out as quietly as possible. He had already given a broker orders to do so. He rather regretted that he could not dispose of George's shares, but these must be kept a little longer; to throw a large quantity upon the market would have a depressing effect and might arouse suspicion.

Presently a man with whom he had dealings was shown in and sat down. His appearance indicated some degree of prosperity, but he looked disturbed and anxious.

"I met Jackson yesterday, and after what he told me of his interview with you, I thought I'd better run up and see you at once," he explained.

Herbert had expected the visit.

"I'm at your service," he said.

"What about the new company? I understand you haven't come to any decision yet about the suggestions we sent you for its flotation."

"No," replied Herbert. "In fact, I've reasons for believing it wouldn't be wise to go any farther in the matter."

The other looked at him in astonishment.

"Well," he said, "I heard that you were not so enthusiastic as you were not long ago, which is why I came down; but I never expected this! Anyway, after what we have done, you are bound to go on with the thing. Our success with the first company will help the shares off."

"That's not certain." Herbert handed him a paper. "You haven't seen Singleton's report."

The man read it hastily, his face changing. Then he looked up with signs of strong indignation.

"You let him give you a thing like this? Paid him for it?"

"What could I do? The man's honest. He declares the country's dangerous; he had two carriers killed. There's no prospect of our obtaining the needful native labor."

"Send somebody else out at once!"

"With the same result. Besides, it's expensive. Singleton's fee wasn't so big, because he shared the cost of his orchid collecting or something of the kind with us. Then he might talk, and there would always be the risk of somebody's challenging us with suppressing his report. If things went wrong, that would lead to trouble."

"Would there be any use in my seeing him?"

Herbert smiled. Singleton would not turn against him; Sylvia had made her influence felt.

"Not the slightest," he answered. "You can take that for granted."

His visitor pondered for a moment or two; and then he crumpled the report in his hand, growing red in the face.

"You seem content with this production. It looks as if you had meant to back out."

Herbert looked at him tranquilly.

"Well," he said, "that's my intention now; and I don't think that you can induce me to alter it. I can't see that we would be justified in floating the concern."

"But it was you who suggested it and led us on! What about the money we have already spent?"

"It's gone. I'm sorry, but things don't always turn out right. When I first mentioned the matter, the prospects looked good; investigation places them in a

less favorable light, for which you can hardly hold me responsible. You took a business risk."

The other man angrily flung the report on the table.

"This has been a blow to me, and I'm far from appreciating the course you've taken. But what about the older concern? Though we don't seem to have turned out much rubber yet, I suppose its position is still satisfactory?"

Herbert saw suspicion in the man's face and he rang a bell.

"I think you had better satisfy yourself; I have the necessary particulars here."

He indicated some books on a neighboring shelf; and then added, when a clerk appeared:

"Will you bring me the extract of our working expenses that I asked you to make out?"

The clerk came back with a sheet of figures, which Herbert handed to his visitor with one of the books, and the man spent some time carefully examining them.

"Everything looks satisfactory; I've no fault to find," he said at length. "But I feel very sore about your giving up the new undertaking."

"It can't be helped," explained Herbert. "If it's any comfort to you, I dropped as much money over preliminary expenses as you did."

After a little further conversation, his visitor left and Herbert resumed his work. On the whole, the interview had been less embarrassing than he expected, and though it was likely that the rest of his colleagues would call and expostulate, he was ready to meet them. His excuse for abandoning the project was, on the face of it, a good one; but he had no thought of giving

these men, who were largely interested in the original company, a word of warning. It was undesirable that they should sell their shares until he had disposed of his. They had, he argued, the same opportunities for forecasting the course of the market and gaging the trend of investors' ideas as he enjoyed, and if they did not make use of them, it was their fault. The stock had reached a satisfactory premium, which was all that he had promised; he could not be expected to guarantee its remaining at the high level.

During the next three or four weeks his broker sold out his shares in small blocks, and when the quantity had been largely reduced, Herbert decided that he would dispose of those he had purchased on George's account. Though there were signs of a diminishing interest in such stock, values had scarcely begun to fall, and having made his position secure, he did not wish his cousin to incur a loss. Accordingly he sent instructions to sell another lot of shares.

He was very busy the next day when a telegram was brought him, but he sat still for some minutes considering it. The market, it stated, had suddenly fallen flat, and as prices were giving way sharply, further orders were requested. The change Herbert had foreseen had come a little sooner than he had expected. He still held some shares, which he had thought of keeping, because it might, after all, prove judicious to retain a degree of control in the company, and having sold the rest at a good profit, a moderate fall in their value would be of less consequence. The drop, however, was marked, and he decided to further reduce the quantity standing in his name, instead of realizing those belonging to his cousin. George must

take his chance; and the market might rally. As a result of these reflections he wired his broker to sell, and in a few hours received an answer.

"Sale effected within limit given, market since broken badly, expect slump."

Herbert saw that he had acted with prudence, though it was evident that his cousin had incurred a serious loss. He was sorry for this, but it could not be helped.

A few days later he was sitting beside the fire at home after his evening meal when Sylvia entered the room in his wife's absence. She stood near the hearth, examining some embroidery in her hand, but she looked up presently, and it became evident that she had been reading the papers.

"There seems to be a sharp fall in rubber shares," she said. "Will it affect you?"

"No," replied Herbert, "not seriously."

"I suppose that means you must have anticipated the fall and sold out — unloaded, I think you call it — in time?"

Herbert did not wish to discuss the matter. He had already had one or two trying interviews with his business colleagues, and the opinions they had expressed about him still rankled in his mind. He was not particularly sensitive, but the subject was an unpleasant one.

"Something of the kind," he answered. "One has to take precautions."

Sylvia laughed.

"One could imagine your taking them. You're not the man to be caught at a disadvantage, are you?"

"Well," he said dryly, "it's a thing I try to avoid."

Sylvia sat down, as if she meant to continue the conversation, which was far from what he desired, but he could not be discourteous.

"Had George any shares in your company?" she asked.

There was no way of avoiding a reply, without arousing her suspicions; Herbert knew that she was keen-witted and persistent.

"Yes," he said, "he had a quantity."

"Have those shares been sold?"

This was a more troublesome question, but Herbert was compelled to answer.

"No; not yet. It's unfortunate that the market broke before I could get rid of them, but it may rally. I'm rather disturbed about the matter; but, after all, one has to take one's chance in buying shares. Dealing in the speculative sorts is to a large extent a game of hazard."

"I suppose so, but then somebody must win."

"No," returned Herbert, "now and then everybody loses."

Sylvia glanced at him with a mocking smile.

"Even those in the inside ring? When that happens, it must be something like a catastrophe. But I'm sorry for George; he doesn't deserve this."

Herbert could not deny it; but, to his surprise, the girl leaned forward, speaking in an authoritative tone.

"I don't know what you can do, but you must do something to get George out of the difficulty. It's obvious that you led him into it — he isn't the man to go in for rash speculation; he would have chosen something safe."

It was a relief to Herbert that his wife came in just then; but, as he had reason for believing that she would not remain, he decided that he would go out and post some letters. Sylvia seemed to be in an inquisitive mood, and he did not wish to be left alone with her.

The night was fine but dark; in places a thin, low-lying mist that hung over the meadows obscured the hedgerows, and it grew more dense as Herbert approached the river, which brawled noisily among the stones. The man, however, scarcely noticed this; his mind was occupied with other matters. Sylvia's attitude had disturbed him. She was useful as an ally, but she could not be allowed to criticize his conduct or to give him orders. Moreover, he had reasons for believing that investors in his company might share her views, and he looked for serious trouble with two or three gentlemen who blamed him for their losses, and had so far incivilly refused to be pacified by his explanations.

Herbert was of a philosophic disposition, and realized that one must not expect too much. Having made a handsome profit, he felt that he ought to be content, and bear a certain amount of suspicion and contumely with unruffled good-humor. For all that, he found it disagreeable to be looked upon as a trickster, and it was worse when his disgusted associates used more offensive epithets in his presence.

He was considering how he should deal with them when he entered a thicker belt of mist. It shut him in so that he could see nothing ahead, but there was a strong fence between him and the river, and he went on, lost in thought, until the mist was suddenly il-

luminated and a bright light flashed along the road. The hoot of a motor-horn broke out behind him, and, rudely startled, he sprang aside. He was too late; somebody cried out in warning, and the next moment he was conscious of a blow that flung him bodily forward. He came down with a crash; something seemed to grind him into the stones; there was a stabbing pain in his side, and he lost consciousness.

Fortunately, the big car was promptly stopped, and two men sprang down. An indistinct object lay just behind the forward pair of wheels, and in anxious haste they dragged it clear and into the glare of the lamps. Herbert's hat had fallen off; he was scarcely breathing, and his face was ghastly white; but one of the men recognized him.

"It's Lansing," he exclaimed. "Seems badly hurt, though I'd nearly pulled her up when she struck him."

"He was dragged some way; jacket must have caught the starting crank or something; but that doesn't matter now." He raised his voice. "Dreadfully sorry, Mr. Lansing; can you hear me?"

There was no answer, and the man shook his head.

"I'm afraid this is serious."

His companion looked unnerved, but he roused himself with an effort.

"It is, and we're behaving like idiots, wasting time that may be valuable. Get hold and lift him in; his house is scarcely a mile away."

They had some difficulty in getting the unconscious man into the car; and then its owner backed it twice into a bank before he succeeded in turning round, but in three or four minutes they carried Herbert into Brantholme, and afterward drove away at top speed

in search of assistance. It was, however, an hour later when they returned with a doctor, and he looked grave after he had examined his patient.

"Your husband has two ribs broken," he told Mrs. Lansing. "In a way, that's not very serious, but he seems to be prostrated by the shock. There are a few things that must be done at once; and then we'll have to keep him as quiet as possible."

It was two hours later when he left the house, promising to return early the next day with a nurse; and Herbert lay, still and unconscious, in a dimly lighted room.

CHAPTER XVII

HERBERT IS PATIENT

ON the second morning after the accident, Herbert, lying stiffly swathed in bandages, opened his eyes in a partly darkened room. A nurse was standing near a table, and when the injured man painfully turned his head, the doctor, who had been speaking to her, came toward him.

"I think we can let you talk a little now," he said. "How do you feel?"

Herbert's face relaxed into a feeble smile.

"Very far from happy. I suppose I've been badly knocked about?"

"I've treated more serious cases, and you'll get over it. But you'll have to reconcile yourself to lying quiet for a long while."

Herbert made no reply to this, but his expression suggested that he was trying to think.

"Has the thing got into the papers?" he asked.

The doctor was a little surprised; it seemed a curious point for his patient to take an interest in, but he was willing to indulge him.

"It's early yet, but one of the *Courier* people stopped me as I was driving out and I gave him a few particulars. You can't hush the matter up."

"No," said Herbert. "You did quite right.

Hadn't you better mention exactly what's the matter with me?"

"If I did, you wouldn't understand it," said the doctor, who generally adopted a cheerful, half-humorous tone. "In plain English, you have two ribs broken, besides a number of contusions, and I'm inclined to suspect your nervous system has received a nasty shock."

"And the cure?"

"Complete rest, patience, and perhaps a change of scene when you're able to get about."

"That means I'll have to drop all active interest in my business for some time?"

"I'm afraid so; by and by we'll consider when you can resume it."

It struck the doctor that Herbert was not displeased with the information; and that seemed strange, considering that he was a busy, energetic man. He lay silent a while with an undisturbed expression.

"I wonder if you would write a telegram and a letter for me?" he asked at length.

"With pleasure, if you don't think you have talked enough. Can't you wait until to-morrow?"

"I'll feel easier when I've got it off my mind."

The doctor thought this likely. He made a sign of acquiescence and took out his notebook; and Herbert give him the rubber company's London address and then dictated:

"*Regret I am incapacitated for business for indefinite period by motor accident. If advisable appoint new director in my place before shareholders' meeting, which cannot attend. Compelled to remain in strict quietness.*"

"You might send these people a short note," he added, "stating that I'm submitting to your advice, and giving them a few particulars about my injuries."

"I'll be glad to do so."

"Then there's only another thing. I'd like some notice of the accident put into a leading London paper — it will explain my retirement to people who would soon begin to wonder why I wasn't at my post."

"It shall be attended to; but I scarcely think Mr. Phillips and his motoring friend will appreciate the notoriety you will confer on them."

Herbert smiled.

"There's no reason why I should consider Phillips. If he will drive furiously in the dark and run over people — this isn't his first accident — he must take the consequences. But you can tell him, with my compliments, that I'll let him off, if he'll be more cautious in future. Now I feel that I'd like to rest or go to sleep again."

The doctor went out somewhat puzzled — his patient seemed singularly resigned to inaction and glad to escape from commercial affairs, instead of chafing at his misfortune. After exchanging a few words with Mrs. Lansing, he met Sylvia in the hall.

"How is he this morning?" she asked.

"Better than I expected, able to take an interest in things. I was glad to find him so acquiescent — it isn't usual. He didn't seem disturbed when he asked me to write a telegram expressing his willingness to give up his director's post."

He had not mentioned this matter to Mrs. Lansing. In several ways Sylvia struck him as being the more capable woman, though this was not the impression

her appearance had upon the less practised observers. She looked thoughtful at his news.

"I suppose such a course is necessary," she remarked.

"I believe it's advisable; that is, if there's any likelihood that his duties will make much demand on him for some time to come."

Sylvia changed the subject.

"Have you any particular instructions?"

"None beyond those I've given the nurse. Quietness is the great thing; but it doesn't look as if he'll cause you much trouble."

The prediction was justified. With the exception of a few complaints about his physical discomfort, Herbert displayed an exemplary patience and soon began to improve, for his recovery was assisted by the tranquil state of his mind. The accident had happened at a very opportune time: it furnished an excellent excuse for withdrawing from an embarrassing situation and it would save his credit, if, as seemed probable, difficulties shortly threatened the rubber company. It would look as if any trouble that might fall upon the concern was the result of his having been forced to relinquish control, and nobody could rationally blame him for being run over.

He was lying in a sunny room one afternoon when two gentlemen were shown in. One was the caller with whom he had an interview in his office before the accident. They inquired about his progress with rather forced courtesy; and then one of them said:

"We looked in on the doctor who wrote to us about your injury before we came here, and he told us you

were strong enough for a little quiet conversation. We haven't appointed another director yet."

"Then you had better do so," Herbert advised.

"You mean to stick to your withdrawal? You're the only person who can pull the company out of its difficulties."

"Has it got into any difficulties?" Herbert inquired. "You see, I've been compelled to give orders for all correspondence to be dealt with at the London office, and I'm advised not to read the financial papers or anything that might have a disturbing effect."

The man who had not yet spoken betrayed some impatience.

"We're up to the eyes in trouble, as you must have guessed. Have you asked yourself what the body of the shareholders are likely to think?"

"It's fairly obvious. They'll consider it a misfortune that I was knocked over shortly before a critical time; possibly they'll attribute everything unsatisfactory in the company's affairs to my not being in charge."

One of the visitors glanced meaningly at his companion. There was truth in what Lansing said. The angry shareholders would not discriminate carefully; they would blame the present directors, who would have to face a serious loss while Lansing had made a profit. It was a galling situation; and what made it worse was that Lansing's expression hinted that he found it somewhat humorous.

"The fact that you sold out so soon before the fall will have its significance," said the first man. "The thing has a suspicious look."

"I must risk a certain amount of misconception," Herbert replied languidly. "I may as well point out that I still hold the shares required as a director's qualification, which is all it was necessary for me to do. Was it your intention to keep the stock you hold permanently?"

They could not answer him, and he smiled.

"As a matter of fact, we all intended to sell off a good portion as soon as the premium justified it; the only difference of opinion was about the point it must reach, and that, of course, was a matter of temperament. Well, I was lucky enough to get rid of part of my stock at a profit; and there was nothing to prevent your doing the same. Instead of that, you held on until the drop came; it was an imprudence for which you can't blame me."

"Our complaint is that you foresaw the fall and never said a word."

"Granted. Why didn't you foresee it? You had the right of access to all the information in my hands; you could inspect accounts in the London office; I suppose you read the financial papers. It would have been presumptuous if I'd recommended you to sell, and my forecast might have proved incorrect. In that case you would have blamed me for losing your money."

This was incontestable. Though they knew he had betrayed them, Lansing's position was too strong to be assailed.

"You might have mentioned that you contemplated retiring from the board," one remarked. "Then we would have known what to expect."

"A little reflection will show the futility of your

suggestion. How could I contemplate being run over by a motor-car?"

"Well," said the second man in a grim tone, "you can't deny the accident was in some respects a fortunate one for you."

"I'm doubtful whether you would have appreciated it, in my place. But you don't seem to realize that I'm withdrawing from the board because I'm incapacitated for the duties."

Then the nurse, to whom Herbert had given a hint, came in; and he made a sign of resignation, quite as though overpowered by regret.

"I'm sorry I'm not allowed to talk very much yet. Will you have a cigar and some refreshment before you leave?"

His visitors rose, and one of them turned to him with a curious expression.

"No, thanks," he said pointedly. "Considering everything, I don't think we'll give you the trouble."

With a few conventional words they withdrew, and Herbert smiled at the nurse.

"I believe Dr. Ballin was most concerned about the injury to my nerves," he said. "Have you noticed anything wrong with them?"

"Not lately. They seem to be in a normal state."

"That," said Herbert, "is my own opinion. You wouldn't imagine that I had just finished a rather trying interview?"

"No; you look more amused than upset."

"There was something humorous in the situation; that's often the case when you see greedy people wasting effort and ingenuity. Perhaps you heard my visitors expressing their anxiety about my health, though

I've a suspicion that they felt more like wishing the car had made an end of me."

The nurse laughed and told him that he had better rest; and Herbert lay back upon the cushions she arranged, with calm content.

During the evening, Sylvia entered the room, dressed a little more carefully than usual, and Herbert glanced at her with appreciation.

"You look charming, though that's your normal state," he said. "Where are you going?"

"With Muriel, to dine with the Wests; have you forgotten? But I came in because Muriel told me you had a letter from George by the last post."

"So you're still interested in his doings," Herbert rejoined.

"Of course. Does that surprise you?"

"I was beginning to think there was some risk of your forgetting him, which, perhaps, wouldn't be altogether unnatural. He's a long way off, which has often its effect, and there's no denying the fact that in many respects you and he are different."

"Doesn't the same thing apply to you and Muriel? Everybody knows you get on excellently in spite of it."

Herbert laughed. He was aware that his friends had wondered why he had married Muriel, and suspected that some of them believed her money had tempted him. Nevertheless, he made her an affectionate as well as a considerate husband. In business matters he practised the easy morality of a hungry beast of prey, but he had his virtues.

"Yes," he said, "that's true. Do you find it encouraging?"

Sylvia had felt a little angry, though she had known that it was seldom wise to provoke her host.

Without waiting for her answer he continued, half seriously: "There's often one person who thinks better of us than we deserve, and I dare say I'm fortunate in that respect. In such a case, one feels it an obligation not to abuse that person's confidence."

A slight flush crept into Sylvia's face. George believed in her and she was very shabbily rewarding his trust.

"I'm surprised to hear you moralizing. It's not a habit of yours," she remarked.

"No," said Herbert, pointedly; "though it may now and then make one feel a little uncomfortable, it seldom does much good. But we were talking about George. He tells me that winter's beginning unusually soon; they've had what he calls a severe cold snap and the prairie's deep with snow. He bought some more stock and young horses as an offset to the bad harvest, and he's doubtful whether he has put up hay enough. West and he are busy hauling stovewood home from a bluff; and he has had a little trouble with some shady characters as a result of his taking part in a temperance campaign. I think that's all he has to say."

Sylvia broke into half-incredulous merriment.

"It's hard to imagine George as a temperance reformer. Think of him, making speeches!"

"Speeches aren't much in George's line," Herbert admitted. "Still, in one way, I wasn't greatly astonished at the news. He's just the man to be drawn into difficulties he might avoid, provided that somebody could convince him the thing needed doing."

"Then you think he has been convinced?"

"I can hardly imagine George's setting out on a work of the kind he mentioned without some persuasion," said Herbert with a smile. "The subject's not one he ever took much interest in, and he's by no means original."

Sylvia agreed with him, but she was silent a few moments, reclining in an easy chair before the cheerful fire, while she glanced round the room. It was comfortably furnished, warm, and brightly lighted; a strong contrast to the lonely Canadian homestead to which her thoughts wandered. She could recall the unpolished stove, filling the place with its curious, unpleasant smell, and the icy draughts that eddied about it. She could imagine the swish of driving snow about the quivering wooden building when the dreaded blizzards raged; the strange, oppressive silence when the prairie lay still in the grip of the Arctic frost; and George coming in with half-frozen limbs and snow-dust on his furs, to spend the dreary evening in trying to keep warm. The picture her memory painted was vivid and it had a disturbing effect. It was in her service that the man was toiling in western Canada.

"Well," she said, rising with some abruptness, "it's time we got off. I'd better see if Muriel is ready."

CHAPTER XVIII

BLAND MAKES A SACRIFICE

SYLVIA was sitting by the hearth in Ethel West's drawing-room, her neatly shod feet on the fender, her low chair on the fleecy rug, and she made a very dainty and attractive picture. She felt the cold and hated discomfort of any kind, though it was characteristic of her that she generally succeeded in avoiding it. Ethel sat near by, watching her with calmly curious eyes, for Sylvia was looking pensive. Mrs. Lansing was talking to Stephen West on the opposite side of the large room.

"How is Edgar getting on?" Sylvia asked. "I suppose you hear from him now and then."

Ethel guessed where the question led and responded with blunt directness.

"Doesn't George write to you?"

"Not often. Herbert has just got a letter, but there was very little information in it; George is not a brilliant correspondent. I thought Edgar might have written by the same mail."

"As it happens, he did," said Ethel. "He describes the cold as fierce, and gives some interesting details of his sensations when the warmth first comes back to his half-frozen hands or limbs; then he adds a vivid account of a blizzard that George and he nearly got lost in."

"Things of that kind make an impression on a newcomer," Sylvia languidly remarked. "One gets used to them after a while. Did he say anything else?"

"There was an enthusiastic description of a girl he has met; he declares she's a paragon. This, of course, is nothing new, but it's a little astonishing that he doesn't seem to contemplate making love to her in his usual haphazard manner. She seems to have inspired him with genuine respect."

"I can't think of any girl who's likely to do so."

"He gives her name — Flora Grant."

Sylvia betrayed some interest.

"I knew her — I suppose she is a little less impossible than the rest. But go on."

"One gathers that George is having an anxious time; Edgar goes into some obscure details about crops and cattle-raising. Then he hints at some exciting adventures they have had as a result of supporting a body that's trying to close the hotels."

This was what Sylvia had been leading up to. She agreed with Herbert that it was most unlikely George would take any part in such proceedings without some prompting, and she was curious to learn who had influenced him.

"There was a word or two in Herbert's letter to the same effect," she said. "The thing strikes one as amusing. George, of course, does not explain why he joined these people."

A smile of rather malicious satisfaction crept into Ethel's eyes. "According to Edgar, it was because his neighbors, the Grants, urged it. The father of the girl he mentioned seems to be a leader in the movement."

Sylvia carefully suppressed any sign of the annoyance she felt. It was, of course, impossible that George should be seriously attracted by Flora, but his action implied that he and the Grants must be good friends. No doubt, he met the girl every now and then, and they had much in common. Sylvia did not mean to marry George; but it was pleasant to feel that she could count on his devotion, and she resented the idea of his falling under the influence of anybody else. She had never thought of Flora as dangerous — George was so steadfast — but she now realized that there might, perhaps, be some slight risk. A girl situated as Flora was would, no doubt, make the most of her opportunities. Sylvia grew somewhat angry; she felt she was being badly treated.

"After all," she said calmly, "I suppose there's no reason why George shouldn't set up as a reformer if it pleases him. It must, however, be rather a novelty for your brother."

Ethel laughed.

"I believe it's the excitement that has tempted him. Still, if George is taking any active part in the matter, Edgar will probably find it more than a light diversion." Then she changed the subject. "Did I tell you that we expect Captain Bland to-night?"

Sylvia started slightly. She was aware that Ethel took what could best be described as an unsympathetic interest in her affairs, but the sudden reference to Bland threw her off her guard.

"No," she said. "Though you have met him, I didn't think you knew him well."

"I believe it's chiefly a business visit. Stephen, you know, has some reputation as a commercial lawyer,

and Bland couldn't arrange to see him in town. Anyway, he should be here soon."

Bland arrived half an hour later, but was unable to do more than shake hands with Sylvia before West took him away to another room. It was some time before they returned; and then West kept the party engaged in general conversation until it broke up.

"I'll walk down the road with you," he said to Mrs. Lansing, and afterward turned to Bland. "How are you going to get back?"

Bland said that the man who had driven him from the station was waiting in the neighboring village, and when they left the house he walked on with Sylvia, leaving Mrs. Lansing and West to follow. It was a clear night, with a chill of frost in the air. A bright half-moon hung above the shadowy hills, and the higher boughs of the bare trees cut in sharp tracery against the sky. Dead leaves lay thick upon the road and here and there a belt of mist trailed across a meadow. Sylvia, however, did not respond when her companion said something about the charm of the walk.

"Why didn't you send me word you were coming?" she asked.

"I didn't know until this morning, when I got a note from West, and I must be back in time for to-morrow's parade. Besides, you told me at the junction that I was not to be allowed to meet you again for some time."

Sylvia smiled at him.

"Haven't you found out that you needn't take everything I say too literally?"

Bland stopped, pressing the hand on his arm.

"Does that apply to all you said on the evening when we sat outside the inn?"

"No," answered Sylvia firmly. "It does not; please understand that. I must stick to what I told you then." She paused, and they heard the soft fall of approaching feet before she resumed with a laugh: "Go on, if you don't want the others to think we are waiting for them."

Bland obeyed, a little soothed, though he saw she was not yet ready to allow a renewal of his pleading. Sylvia had obviously meant that she wished to be left alone with him.

"Why did you call on Stephen West?" she asked, presently.

"I'd meant to tell you. But, first of all, is Lansing still connected with the rubber company? West didn't seem very well informed upon the point."

"Neither am I," replied Sylvia thoughtfully. "I only know he hasn't the large interest in it that he had."

"Then I'll have to explain, because I don't know what to do. Lansing gave me a tip to buy some shares, and when some friends said I'd got a good thing, I went to him again. I must say he was pretty guarded, but I got a hint and acted on it, with the result that I have dropped a good deal of money. This," he added deprecatingly, "is not the kind of thing I should talk to you about, but I was told that Lansing couldn't receive any callers, and you'll see why you should know."

"I'm beginning to understand."

"Well," said Bland, "shortly after Lansing's accident, I wrote to the secretary, asking some questions,

and he doesn't seem to have been cautious enough in his answer — I have it here. There has been trouble about the company, and I attended a meeting of some disgusted people who had put their money into it. They think they might get part of it back by attacking the promoters, and I'm told that my letter would help them materially."

"Do you want to help them?"

"In a way, it's natural," said Bland with signs of warmth. "I don't see why those fellows should be allowed to get off after tricking people out of the money they've painfully earned."

"How much money have you ever earned?"

Bland laughed.

"You have me there; I haven't been able to buy shares out of my pay. But I made a pot by taking long chances when I backed an outside horse. It comes to much the same thing."

"I don't think it does," said Sylvia, with a smile. "But it strikes me that your explanation isn't quite complete."

"I went to West, instead of to another lawyer, because I thought he would be acquainted with Lansing's present position; but, while he agreed that the letter might be valuable to the objectors, he couldn't help me. The end of it is that I don't want to do anything that might hurt Lansing."

Sylvia reflected. She hardly thought his loss would seriously embarrass Bland; she owed Herbert something and might need his aid, and she did not wish any discredit to be cast upon a connection of hers.

"Well," she said, "I believe Herbert is still to some extent connected with the company; he can hardly

have withdrawn altogether. Anyway, he had a large interest in it, and I think its management was in his hands. He might suffer, so to speak, retrospectively."

"Yes," said Bland, "that didn't strike me. You're right; there's only one course open." He took a paper from his pocket and handed it to her. "Give that to Lansing, and tell him he may do what he thinks fit with it."

"You're very generous," said Sylvia, coloring as she took the letter.

"I'm afraid I've behaved badly in not keeping the thing from you; but you see how I was situated, and you'll have to forgive me."

"That isn't difficult," Sylvia told him.

They walked on in silence for a while; and then Bland looked around at her.

"There's a thing I must mention. I've had a hint to ask for a certain post abroad. It is not a very desirable one in some respects, but the pay's pretty good, and it would bring the man who took it under the notice of people who arrange the better Government appointments. I should have to stay out at least two years."

Sylvia was startled, and annoyed. Now that the man owned her sway, she did not mean to accede to his wishes too readily. Some obscure reason made her shrink from definitely binding herself to him, but his intimation had forced on something of the nature of a crisis.

"Do you wish to go?" she asked.

"No," he said hotly; "you know that."

"Then," said Sylvia softly, "I think you had better stay at home."

He stopped again and faced her.

"You must tell me what you mean!"

"It ought to be clear," she murmured. "Don't you think I should miss you?"

With restrained quietness he laid his hand on her shoulder.

"You must listen for a minute, Sylvia. Up to the present, I've been passed over by the authorities; but now I've been given my chance. If I can hammer the raw native levies into shape and keep order along a disturbed frontier, it will lead to something better. Now, I'm neither a military genius nor altogether a careless idler — I believe I can do this work; but, coming rather late, it has less attraction for me. Well, I would let the chance slip, for one reason only; but if I'm to go on continually repressing myself and only allowed to see you at long intervals, I might as well go away. You must clearly understand on what terms I remain."

She made a little appealing gesture.

"Yes," she said; "but you must wait and not press me too hard. I am so fenced in by conventions; so many people's susceptibilities have to be considered. I haven't a girl's liberty."

Bland supposed this was as far as she ventured in allusion to her widowed state; but, stirred as he was by her implied submission, it struck him as significant that she should so clearly recognize the restrictions conventionality imposed on her.

"I think," he returned, "the two people who deserve most consideration are you and myself."

"Ah!" said Sylvia, "you deserve it most. You have been very forbearing; you have done all I asked.

That is why I know you will bear with a little delay, when it's needful."

He made a sign of reluctant assent; and then, to his annoyance, two figures emerged from the shadow of the trees not far away. There was nothing to do except to move on, but he thrilled at the slight, grateful pressure of Sylvia's hand upon his arm.

"My dear," he said, "I wish most devoutly that West or Mrs. Lansing had been lame."

Sylvia broke into a ripple of laughter, which somehow seemed to draw them closer. At Herbert's gate they separated, and Bland walked on in an exultant mood which was broken by fits of thoughtfulness. Sylvia had tacitly pledged herself to him, but he was still her unacknowledged lover and the position was irksome. Then he remembered her collectedness, which had been rather marked, but he had learned that emotion is more frequently concealed than forcibly expressed. Moreover, he had never imagined that Sylvia was wholly free from faults; he suspected that there was a vein of calculating coldness in her, though it caused him no concern. Bland was a man of experience who had acquired a good-humored toleration with the knowledge that one must not expect too much from human nature.

While Bland was being driven to the station, Sylvia entered the room where Herbert lay, and handed him the letter.

"Captain Bland came in during the evening to see Stephen and sent you this," she said. "He told me you were to do what you thought fit with it."

Herbert perused the letter, and then reaching out with some difficulty, flung it into the fire.

"I've taken him at his word," he said. "Have you read the thing?"

"No; I fear the details would have puzzled me; but I understand its general import. How was it your secretary was so careless?"

Herbert smiled.

"The man's smart enough, as a rule; but we all have our weak moments. This, however, is not the kind of thing that's likely to lead to his advancement." He lay quiet for a moment or two; and then went on: "I'm grateful to you. Had you much trouble in persuading Bland to let you have the letter?"

"No; he offered it voluntarily."

"Then the man must have been desperately anxious to please you. It looks as if his condition were getting serious."

"I resent coarseness," exclaimed Sylvia.

Herbert laughed.

"Oh," he said, "you and I can face the truth. As West's a lawyer, Bland's visit to him is, of course, significant; the man knew that letter might have been worth something in hard cash to him, as well as affording him the satisfaction of making things hot for the directors of the company, among whom I was included. He would hardly have parted with it unless he had a strong inducement."

"His motives don't concern you," retorted Sylvia. "You ought to appreciate his action."

"I appreciate it as sincerely as I do yours, because you must have shown that you didn't want him to use the letter, though I'm inclined to think your motives were rather mixed; one could scarcely expect them all to be purely benevolent."

Sylvia smiled. He was keen-witted and she found something amusing in the ironical good-humor which often characterized him.

"Anyhow," he continued, "you're a staunch and capable ally, and as that gives you a claim on me, you won't find me reluctant to do my part whenever the time comes."

Then Mrs. Lansing came in, and on the whole Sylvia was glad of the interruption. Herbert's remarks were now and then unpleasantly suggestive. He had called her his ally, but she felt more like his accomplice, which was much less flattering.

CHAPTER XIX

AN OPPOSITION MOVE

IT was a wet and chilly night, and Singleton sat in an easy chair beside the hearth in his city quarters with an old pipe in his hand. The room was shabbily furnished, the hearthrug had a hole in it, the carpet was threadbare, and Singleton's attire harmonized with his surroundings, though the box of cigars and one or two bottles and siphons on the table suggested that he expected visitors. The loose Tuxedo jacket he had bought in America was marked by discolored patches; his carpet slippers were dilapidated. His means, though long restricted, would have warranted better accommodations; but his clothes were comfortable and he did not think it worth while to put on anything smarter. There was a vein of rather bitter pride in the man, and he would not, out of deference to any other person's views, alter conditions that suited him.

A notebook lay beside him and several bulky treatises on botany were scattered about, but he had ceased work and was thinking. After the shadow and silence of the tropical bush, to which he was most accustomed, the rattle of the traffic in the wet street below was stimulating; but his reflections were not pleasant. He had waited patiently for another invitation to Lansing's house, which had not arrived, and a day

or two ago he had met Sylvia Marston, upon whom his mind had steadily dwelt, in a busy street. She had bowed to him courteously, but she had made it clear that she did not expect him to stop and speak. It had been a bitter moment to Singleton, but he had calmly faced the truth. He had served his purpose, and he had been dropped. Now, however, a letter from one of the people he was expecting indicated that he might again be drawn into the rubber-exploiting scheme.

The two gentlemen who had called on Herbert were shown in presently.

"It was I who wrote you," the first of them said; "this is my colleague, Mr. Nevis."

Singleton bowed.

"Will you take that chair, Mr. Jackson?" He turned to the other man. "I think you had better have this one; it's comparatively sound."

He was aware that they were looking about his apartment curiously, and no doubt inferring something from its condition; but this was of no consequence. He had learned his value and meant to insist on it, without the assistance of any signs of prosperity.

"I couldn't get up to town, as you suggested," he resumed when they were seated. "I've been rather busy of late."

"That's generally the case with us," Jackson said pointedly.

He was a thin man, very neatly and quietly dressed, with a solemn face and an air of importance. Nevis was stouter and more florid, with a brisker manner, but the stamp of the city was plainly set on both.

"Well," said Singleton, "I'm at your service, now you're here. The cigars are nearest you, Mr. Nevis,

and I can recommend the contents of the smaller bottle. It's a Southern speciality and rather difficult to get in England."

Nevis hesitated. He thought it better that the interview should be conducted on strictly business lines, while to accept the proffered hospitality would tend to place him and the man he wished to deal with on a footing of social equality. But it was desirable not to offend Singleton, and he lighted a cigar.

"To begin with, I must ask if you are still in any way connected with Mr. Lansing?" he said.

"No," answered Singleton with some grimness. "You can take it for granted that he has done with me."

"That clears the ground. We have been considering the report you wrote for him. In our opinion, it was, while not encouraging, hardly sufficient to warrant his abandoning the project, in which, as you have been told, we were associated with him."

"He may have had other motives," Singleton suggested.

Nevis nodded gravely, as if in appreciation of his keenness.

"That," he said, "is what occurred to us. But what is your idea of the scheme?"

"It's clearly stated in the report."

Jackson made a sign of impatience.

"We'll leave the report out and come to the point. Can the rubber, which you say is really to be found, be collected and brought down to the coast without incurring a prohibitive expense?"

"Yes," said Singleton. "But you must understand me. The methods generally adopted in such cases

would be bound to fail. You would require an overseer with rather exceptional technical knowledge, who must, besides this, be quite free from the usual prejudices on the native question. They would, no doubt, be a little difficult to avoid, since at first he would have to put up with a few attempts upon his life; but, if he could combine resolution and strict justice with a conciliatory attitude, the attempt would cease, and I think he could earn you a fair return on a moderate outlay."

Jackson laughed.

"So far as my experience goes, such men are scarce. But I'd better say that we had you in mind when we made this visit. Do you think you could do anything, if we sent you out?"

"Yes," said Singleton quietly; "I believe I could make the venture pay. Whether I'd think it worth while is another matter."

"Then," Nevis interposed, "it's simply a question of terms?"

"Oh, no. You may be surprised to hear that payment is not the first consideration; though it's true. I'm interested in certain investigations which can be carried out only in the tropics. However, you'd better make your offer."

Nevis did so, and Singleton pondered for a few moments.

"The remuneration might suffice, provided that I was given a percentage on the product and one or two special allowances; but before going any farther I must understand your intentions. I'm a botanist, and have no wish to be made use of merely for the purpose of furthering some stock-jobbing scheme. Do you

really want this venture put upon a satisfactory working footing?"

"I'll explain," said Nevis. "The fact is, Lansing let us in rather badly. We spent a good deal of money over this concession, and we're anxious to get it back. Since we can't float the thing on the market at present, we have formed a small private syndicate to develop the property, though we may sell out in a year or two if you can make the undertaking commercially successful. I think you could count on the purchasers' continuing operations."

"Have you considered what Lansing's attitude may be?"

"It won't matter. He has gone out of the business, convinced that the thing's no good; he cleared off most of his rubber shares, for a similar reason. This raises another point — the original company's possessions lie in the same region, though ruled by another state, and things are going badly there. If you could get across and see what could be done, we would pay an extra fee."

Singleton lighted a cigar and leaned back in his chair with a thoughtful expression, and for a minute or two they left him alone. They were keen business men, but they knew that their usual methods would not serve them with this shabbily-dressed, self-possessed botanist.

"Well," he said at length, "your suggestion rather appeals to me, but there's the difficulty that another matter claims my attention. Though it isn't strictly in my line, I've been asked to go out to Canada and assist in the production of a variety of wheat that will ripen quickly; in fact, I was looking up some informa-

tion bearing on the matter when you came in. It's a remarkably interesting subject."

They were clever enough to see that this was not an attempt to enhance the value of his services; the man was obviously a botanical enthusiast, and Nevis showed signs of attention. He had once or twice thought that something might be made out of Canadian land companies.

"One could imagine that," he said. "I understand that it's a matter of high importance."

"The development of the whole northern portion of the prairie country depends on the success of the experiments that are being made," Singleton went on. "Their summers are hot but short; if they can get a grain that ripens early, they can cultivate vast stretches of land that are now, from economic reasons, uninhabitable, and it would make farming a more prosperous business in other tracts. Crops growing in the favored parts are occasionally frozen. It's a coincidence that a day or two ago I got a letter inquiring about that kind of wheat from a friend in Canada who is, as it happens, farming with a cousin of Lansing's." Then he laughed. "All this, however, has nothing to do with the object of your visit. Give me a few more minutes to think it over."

There was silence except for the rattle of wheels outside while he smoked half a cigar; then he turned to his companions.

"I'll go out and undertake your work. I believe you're acting wisely, and that Lansing will be sorry after a while that he threw away his interest in the scheme."

They discussed the details of the project and then

the business men went away, satisfied. Shortly afterward Singleton took a letter out of a paper rack, and when he had read it he leaned back in his chair, lost in pleasant recollections. Some years earlier, he had by chance fallen in with a lad named West when fishing among the Scottish hills. The young man's sister and elder brother were staying with him at the remote hotel in which Singleton had quarters, and somewhat to his astonishment they soon made friends with him.

Poverty had made him reserved; he knew that he was a little awkward and unpolished, but the Wests had not attempted to patronize him. Their cordiality set him at his ease; he liked the careless, good-humored lad; Ethel West, grave-eyed, direct, and candid, made a strong impression, and he had been drawn to the quiet lawyer who was much older than either. They spent delightful days together on the lake and among the hills; Singleton told them something about his studies and ambitions, and in the evenings they persuaded him to sing. Ethel was a musician and Singleton sang well. On leaving they had invited him to visit them; but, partly from diffidence, Singleton had not gone, though he knew these were not the people who took a man up when he could be of service and afterward dropped him.

Now he had received a letter from Edgar West, saying that he was farming in western Canada and inquiring if Singleton could tell him anything about the drought-resisting and quick-ripening properties of certain varieties of wheat. The botanist was glad to place his knowledge at his friend's disposal, and, tak-

ing up pen and paper, he spent an hour on a treatise on the subject, which was to save Lansing expense and trouble, and bring Singleton further communications from Edgar. Then he smoked another pipe and went to bed; and a fortnight later he sailed for the tropics.

Shortly after he had gone, Herbert heard of his departure, and the letter containing the news arrived on a cheerless afternoon during which his doctor had visited him. After the doctor left, Herbert entered the room where his wife and Sylvia were, and took his place in an easy chair by a window. Outside, the lawn was covered with half-melted snow and the trees raised naked, dripping branches above the drooping shrubs. Farther back the hedgerows ran somberly across the white fields, and in the distance the hills loomed, desolate and gray, against a leaden sky.

"Ballin says I'd better take it easy for some time yet," Herbert informed his wife. "In fact, he recommends a trip abroad; Algiers or Egypt, for preference." He indicated the dreary prospect outside the window. "Though he didn't actually insist on my going, the idea's attractive."

"Could you leave your business?" Mrs. Lansing inquired.

Herbert smiled.

"Yes; I think so. I was doing pretty well when I got run over, and things have since slackened down. My manager can look after them while I am away."

This was correct, so far as it went; but he had another reason for deciding not to resume operations for a while. He suspected that his recent conduct had excited distrust and indignation in certain quarters, but

this would, no doubt, blow over before his return. People forgot, and he could avoid those whose confidence in him had proved expensive.

"If that's the case, we may as well get off as soon as it can be arranged," said Mrs. Lansing. She turned to Sylvia. "Of course, you will come with us."

Sylvia hesitated. She believed her influence over Bland would not weaken much in her absence; but, after all, it was wiser to run no risk. Moreover, she would, to some extent, feel her separation from the man.

"I really don't know what I ought to do," she answered. "I might be a restraint upon you — you can't want me always at hand; and I could spend a month or two with Dorothy. She has several times told me to come."

"You would be better with us," Mrs. Lansing rejoined with firmness; and Sylvia suspected her of a wish to prevent her enjoying Bland's society.

"I'll think it over," she said.

After they had discussed the projected journey, Mrs. Lansing withdrew on some domestic errand, and Herbert turned to Sylvia.

"I needn't point out that you'll be no trouble to us, but perhaps I'd better mention that I had a letter from George this post. As there's very little to be done until the spring, he thinks of coming over. I don't know how far that may affect your decision."

Sylvia was a little startled, but she reflected rapidly. The house of the relative she had thought of visiting would be open to George, as would be one or two others in which she might stay a while. It was most undesirable that he should encounter Bland,

which would be likely to happen. Then it struck her that Herbert might derive as little satisfaction from his cousin's visit as it would afford her.

"Have you succeeded in selling George's shares yet?" she asked, and though this was, on the face of it, an abrupt change of subject, she thought Herbert would follow the sequence of ideas.

"No," he answered, with a smile of comprehension. "It was too late when I was able to attend to things; they have dropped to such a price that I'll have to keep them. I'm afraid it will be a blow to George, and he's having trouble enough already with your farm; but, luckily, some other shares I bought on his account show signs of a marked improvement before long."

Sylvia inferred from this that he had not informed his cousin of the state of his affairs, and did not wish to see him until the improvement mentioned, or some other favorable development, should mitigate the shock of discovering what use Herbert had made of his powers. It was clear that it rested with her to decide whether George made the visit or not, because if she went to Egypt he would remain in Canada. But she was not quite ready to give her companion an answer.

"Did I tell you that I met Singleton a little while ago?" she said. "I think he wished to speak, but I merely bowed. I was in a hurry, for one thing."

"It's the first I've heard of it, but you did quite right. Since he was here, one or two of the other directors who tried to give me some trouble have got hold of him. They have sent him out to see what can be done with the rubber property."

"Was that worth while?"

"I shouldn't think so. It strikes me they're wasting their money."

This was Herbert's firm belief, but his judgment while generally accurate, had, in this instance, proved defective. He had failed properly to estimate Singleton's capabilities. It was, however, obvious to Sylvia that he had had no part in the undertaking, and had abandoned his rubber schemes, which implied that George's loss would be serious. There was no doubt that it would suit both Herbert and herself better if George did not come back too soon.

"Well," she said, "that is not a matter of any consequence to me. After all, I think I'll go south with you and Muriel."

Herbert had foreseen this decision.

"It's the most suitable arrangement," he responded. "When I write, I'll mention it to George."

Sylvia went out a little later with a sense of guilt; she felt that in removing the strongest inducement for George's visit she had betrayed him. She was sorry for George, but she could not allow any consideration for him to interfere with her ambitions. Then she resolutely drove these thoughts away. The matter could be looked at in a more pleasant light, and there were several good reasons for the course she had adopted.

Entering the library, she carefully wrote a little note to Captain Bland, and then went in search of Mrs. Lansing.

"I think I'll go over to Susan's for the week-end," she announced. "I promised her another visit, and now I can explain that I'm going away with you."

Mrs. Lansing made no objection, and three or four

days afterward Sylvia met Bland at Mrs. Kettering's house. He arrived after her, and as there were other guests, she had to wait a little while before she could get a word with him alone. She was standing in the big hall, which was unoccupied, rather late in the evening, when he came toward her.

"I thought I should never escape from Kettering; but he's safe for a while, talking guns in the smoking-room," he said.

Sylvia thought that they would be safe from interruption for a few minutes, which would serve her purpose.

"So you have managed to get here," she said.

"Had you any doubt of my succeeding?" Bland asked reproachfully. "Kettering once gave me a standing invitation, and, as it happens, there's a famous horse dealer in this neighborhood with whom I've had some business. That and the few Sunday trains formed a good excuse. I, however, don't mind in the least if Mrs. Kettering attaches any significance to the visit."

Sylvia did not wish to arouse the suspicions of her hostess, but she smiled.

"I expected you, and I'm glad you came," she said.

"That's very nice to hear."

"Don't take too much for granted. Still, I thought I'd like to see you, because I'm going to Egypt with Muriel for some time. Indeed, I shall not be back until the spring."

The man displayed dismayed surprise, and Sylvia waited for his answer with some eagerness. She did not wish to enter into a formal engagement — it was a little too early to make an announcement yet — but she

thought it wise to bind him in some degree before she left.

"Until the spring?" he broke out. "You expect me to let you go?"

"You must," said Sylvia firmly, and added in a softer voice, "I'm rather sorry."

He saw that he could not shake her decison.

"Then we must have a clear understanding," he rejoined hotly. "You know I want you — when is this waiting to end? Tell me now, and let me tell all who care to hear, that you belong to me."

Sylvia made a gesture of protest and coquettishly looked down.

"You must still have patience," she murmured; "the time will soon pass."

"And then?" he asked with eagerness.

She glanced up at him shyly.

"If you will ask me again when I come back, I will give you your answer."

She left him no reason for doubting what that answer would be; and, stretching out his arms, he drew her strongly to him. In a minute or two, however, Sylvia insisted on his returning to his host, and soon afterward Mrs. Kettering came in to look for her.

CHAPTER XX.

A BLIZZARD

A BITTER wind searched the poplar bluff where George and his hired man, Grierson, were cutting fuel. Except in the river valleys, trees of any size are scarce on the prairie, but the slender trunks and leafless branches were closely massed and afforded a little shelter. Outside on the open waste, the cold was almost too severe to face, and George once or twice glanced anxiously across the snowy levels, looking for some sign of Edgar, who should have joined them with the team and sledge. It was, however, difficult to see far, because a gray dimness narrowed in the horizon. George stood, dressed in snow-flecked furs, in the center of a little clearing strewn with rows of fallen trunks from which he was hewing off the branches. The work was hard; his whole body strained with each stroke of the heavy ax, but it failed to keep him warm, and the wind was growing more bitter with the approach of night.

"I don't know what can be keeping West," he said after a while. "We haven't seen the mail-carrier either, and he's two hours late; but he must have had a heavy trail all the way from the settlement. I expect he'll cut out our place and make straight for Grant's. We'll have snow before long."

There was an empty shack not far away where, by

George's consent, the mail-carrier left letters when bad weather made it desirable to shorten his round.

Grierson nodded as he glanced about. The stretch of desolate white prairie had contracted since he had last noticed it, the surrounding dimness was creeping nearer in, and the ranks of poplar trunks were losing their sharpness of form. Now that the men had ceased chopping, they could hear the eerie moaning of the wind and the sharp patter of icy snow-dust among the withered brush.

"It will take him all his time to fetch Grant's; I wish Mr. West would come before it gets dark," Grierson said with a shiver, and fell to work again.

Several minutes passed. George was thinking more about the mail-carrier's movements than about Edgar's. The English letters should have arrived, and he was anxiously wondering if there were any for him. Then, as he stopped for breath, a dim moving blur grew out of the prairie, and he flung down his ax.

"Here's West; we'll have light enough to put up the load," he said.

A little later Edgar led two powerful horses up the narrow trail, and for a while the men worked hard, stacking the logs upon the sledge. Then they set off at the best pace the team could make, and the cold struck through them when they left the bluff.

"Stinging, isn't it?" Edgar remarked. "I couldn't get over earlier; Flett turned up, half frozen, and he kept me. Seems to have some business in this neighborhood, though he didn't say what it is."

George, walking through the snow to leeward of the loaded sledge, where it was a little warmer, be-

trayed no interest in the news. Temperance reform was languishing at Sage Butte and its leaders had received a severe rebuff from the authorities. The police, who had arrested an Indian suspected of conveying liquor to the reservation, had been no more successful, for the man had been promptly acquitted. They had afterward been kept busy investigating the matter of the shooting of George's bull, which had recovered; but they had found no clue to the offender, and nothing of importance had happened for some time.

It had grown dark and the wind was rapidly increasing. Powdery snow drove along before it, obscuring the men's sight and lashing their tingling faces. At times the icy white haze whirled about them so thick that they could scarcely see the blurred dark shape of the sledge, but as they had hauled a good many loads of stovewood home, the trail was plainly marked. It would be difficult to lose it unless deep snow fell. With lowered heads and fur caps pulled well down, they plodded on, until at length George stopped where the shadowy mass of a bluff loomed up close in front of them.

"I'll leave you here and make for the shack," he said. "I want to see if there are any letters."

"It's far too risky," Edgar pointed out. "You'll get lost as soon as you leave the beaten trail."

"I'll have the bluff for a guide, and it isn't far from the end of it to the small ravine. After that I shouldn't have much trouble in striking the fallow."

"It's doubtful," Edgar persisted. "Let the letters wait until to-morrow."

"No," said George, resolutely. "I've waited a

week already; the mail is late. Besides, we'll have worse snow before morning."

Seeing that he had made up his mind, Edgar raised no more objections, and in another few moments George disappeared into a haze of driving snow. When he left the trail he found walking more difficult than he had expected, but though it was hard to see beyond a few yards, he had the bluff to guide him and he kept along the edge of it until the trees vanished suddenly. Then he stopped, buffeted by the wind, to gather breath and fix clearly in his mind the salient features of the open space that he must cross.

If he could walk straight for half a mile, he would strike a small hollow and by following it he would reach a tract of cultivated ground. This, he thought, should be marked by the absence of the taller clumps of grass and the short willow scrub which here and there broke through the snow. There would then be a stretch of about two hundred acres to cross before he found the little shack, whose owner had gone away to work on the railroad during the winter. He expected to have some trouble in reaching it, but he must get the letters, and he set off again, breaking through the snow-crust in places, and trying to estimate the time he took.

A quarter of an hour passed and, as there was no sign of the ravine, he began to wonder whether he had deviated much from his chosen line. In another few minutes he was getting anxious; and then suddenly he plunged knee-deep into yielding snow. It got deeper at the next step and he knew that he had reached the shallow depression, which had been almost filled up by the drifts. He must cross it, and the effort this

entailed left him gasping when he stopped again on the farther side.

It was still possible to retrace his steps, because he could hardly fail to strike the bluff he had left, but there was no doubt that to go on would be perilous. If he missed the shack, he might wander about the prairie until he sank down, exhausted; and after a day of fatiguing labor he knew that he could not long face the wind and frost. There was, however, every sign of a wild storm brewing; it might be several days before he could secure the letters if he turned back, and such a delay was not to be thought of.

He went on, following the ravine where he could trace its course, which was not always possible, until he decided that he must have reached the neighborhood of the farm. There was, however, nothing to indicate that he had done so. He could see only a few yards; the snow had all been smooth and unbroken near the hollow, he could distinguish no difference between any one part of it and the rest; and he recognized the risk he took when he turned his back on his last guide and struggled forward into the waste.

Walking became more difficult, the wind was getting stronger, and there was no sign of the shack. Perhaps he had gone too far to the south. He inclined to the right, but that brought him to nothing that might serve as a guide; there was only smooth snow and the white haze whirling round him. He turned more to the right, growing desperately afraid, stopped once or twice to ascertain by the way the snow drove past whether he was wandering from his course, and plodded on again savagely. At last something began to crackle beneath his feet. Stooping down, he saw

that it was stubble, and he became sensible of a vast relief. He could not be more than a few minutes' walk from the shack.

It was only three or four yards off when he saw it, and on entering he had difficulty in closing the rickety door. Then, when he had taken off his heavy mittens, it cost him some trouble to find and strike a match with his half-frozen hands. Holding up the light, he glanced eagerly at a shelf and saw the two letters he had expected; there was no mistaking the writing and the English stamps. He thrust them safely into a pocket beneath his furs when the match went out and struck another, for his next step required consideration.

The feeble radiance traveled round the little room, showing the rent, board walls and the beams rough from the saw that supported the cedar roofing shingles. A little snow had sifted in and lay on the floor; there was a rusty stove at one end, but no lamp or fuel, and the hay and blankets had been removed from the wooden bunk. Still, as George was warmly clad and had space to move about, he could pass the night there. The roar of the wind about the frail building rendered the prospects of the return journey strongly discouraging. He might, however, be detained all the next day by the snow; but what chiefly urged him to face the risk of starting for the homestead was his inability to read his letters. The sight of them had sent a thrill through him, which had banished all sense of the stinging cold. He had eagerly looked forward to a brief visit to the old country, and Sylvia had, no doubt, bidden him come. It was delightful to picture her welcome, and the evenings they would spend in

Muriel Lansing's pretty drawing-room while he told her what he had done and unfolded his plans for the future. He could brook no avoidable delay in reading her message, and, nerving himself for a struggle, he set out again.

The shack vanished the moment he left it. The snow was thicker; and, floundering heavily through the storm, George had almost given up the attempt to find the ravine, when he fell violently into a clearer part of it. Then he gathered courage, for the bluff was large and would be difficult to miss; but it did not appear when he expected it. He was breathless, nearly blinded, and on the verge of exhaustion, when he crashed into a dwarf birch and, looking up half dazed, saw an indistinct mass of larger trees. He had now a guide, but it was hard to follow, with his strength fast falling and the savage wind buffeting him. He had stopped a moment, gasping, when something emerged from the driving snow. It was moving; it looked like a team with a sledge or wagon, and he thought that his companions had come in search of him. He cried out, but there was no answer, and though he tried to run, the beasts vanished as strangely as they had appeared.

They had, however, left their tracks, coming up from the south, where the settlement lay, and this convinced him that they had not been driven by Edgar or Grierson. He made an attempt to overtake them and, falling, went on again, wondering a little who the strangers could be; though this was not a matter of much consequence. If they had blankets or driving-robes, they might pass the night without freezing in the bluff, where there was fuel; but George was most clearly

conscious of the urgent need for his reaching the homestead before his strength gave out.

At last he struck the beaten trail which had fortunately not yet been drifted up, and after keeping to it for a while he saw a faint twinkle of light in front of him. A voice answered his shout and when he stopped, keeping on his feet with difficulty and utterly worn out, a team came up, blurred and indistinct, out of the driving snow. After that somebody seized him and pushed him toward an empty sledge.

"Get down out of the wind; here's the fur robe!" cried a voice he recognized. "We came back as soon as we had thrown off the load."

George remembered very little about the remainder of the journey, but at last the sledge stopped where a warm glow of light shone out into the snow. Getting up with some trouble he reached the homestead door and walked heavily into the room where he sank, gasping, into a chair. He felt faint and dizzy, he could scarcely breathe; but those sensations grew less troublesome as he recovered from the violent change of temperature. Throwing off his furs, he noticed that Flett sat smoking near the stove.

"Here's some coffee," said the constable. "It's pretty lucky Grierson found you. I can't remember a worse night."

George drank the coffee. He still felt heavy and partly dazed; his mind was lethargic, and his hands and feet tingled painfully with the returning warmth. He knew that there was something he ought to tell Flett, but it was a few minutes before he could think clearly.

"I met a team near the bluff and lost it again almost immediately," he mumbled finally.

Flett's face became intent.

"Did the men who were with it see you? Which way were they going?"

"No," said George sleepily. "Anyway, though I called I didn't get an answer. I think they were going west."

"And there's no homestead for several leagues, except Langside's shack. They'll camp there sure."

"I don't see why they shouldn't," George remarked with languid indifference.

"Hasn't it struck you why those fellows should be heading into waste prairie on a night like this? Guess what they've got in the wagon's a good enough reason. If the snow's not too bad, they'll pull out for the Indian reservation soon as it's light to-morrow."

"You think they have liquor with them?" asked George.

Flett nodded and walked toward the door, and George felt the sudden fall of temperature and heard the scream of the wind. In a minute or two, however, the constable reappeared with Edgar.

"I'd get them sure; they're in the shack right now," Flett declared.

"You would never find it," Edgar remonstrated. "We had hard enough work to strike the homestead, and we were on a beaten trail, which will have drifted up since then. You'll have to drop the idea — it's quite impossible."

"It's blamed hard luck," grumbled Flett. "I may trail the fellows, but I certainly won't get them with the liquor right in the wagon, as it will be now, and without something of that kind it's mighty hard to secure a conviction. I've no use for the average jury;

what we want is power to drop on to a man without any fuss or fooling and fix him so he won't make more trouble."

"It's fortunate you'll never get it," Edgar remarked. "I've a notion it would be a dangerous thing to trust even a Northwest policeman with. You're not all quite perfect yet."

Then George, recovering from his lethargy, remembered the letters and eagerly opened the one from Sylvia. It consisted of a few sentences in which she carelessly told him that if he came over he would not see her, as she was going to Egypt with Herbert and Muriel. The hint of regret that her journey could not be put off looked merely conventional, but she said he might make his visit in the early summer, as she would have returned by then.

George's face hardened as he read it, for the disappointment was severe. He thought that Sylvia might have remembered that he could not leave the farm after spring had begun. The man felt wounded and, for once, inclined to bitterness. His optimistic faith, which idealized its object, was bound to bring him suffering when dispelled by disillusion; offering sincere homage to all that seemed most worthy, he had not learned tolerance. Though his appreciation was quick and generous, he must believe in what he admired, and it was, perhaps, a misfortune that he was unable to recognize shortcomings with cynical good-humor. He could distinguish white from black — the one stood for spotless purity, the other was very dark indeed — but his somewhat restricted vision took no account of the more common intermediate shades.

For all that, he was incapable of seriously blaming

Sylvia. Her letter had hurt him, but he began to make excuses for her, and several that seemed satisfactory presented themselves; then, feeling a little comforted, he opened the letter from Herbert with some anxiety. When he read it, he let it drop upon the table and set his lips tight. His cousin informed him that it would be most injudicious to raise any money just then by selling shares, as he had been requested to do. Those he had bought on George's account had depreciated in an unexpected manner and the markets were stagnant. George, he said, must carry on his farming operations as economically as possible, until the turn came.

"Bad news?" said Edgar sympathetically.

"Yes. I'll have to cut out several plans I'd made for spring; in fact, I don't quite see how I'm to go on working on a profitable scale. We'll have to do without the extra bunch of stock I was calculating on; and I'm not sure I can experiment with that quick-ripening wheat. There are a number of other things we'll have to dispense with."

"We'll pull through by some means," Edgar rejoined encouragingly, and George got up.

"I feel rather worn out," he said. "I think I'll go to sleep."

He walked wearily from the room, crumpling up the letters he had risked his life to secure.

CHAPTER XXI

GRANT COMES TO THE RESCUE

THE storm had raged for twenty-four hours, but it had now passed, and it was a calm night when a little party sat in George's living-room. Outside, the white prairie lay still and silent under the Arctic frost, but there was no breath of wind stirring and the room was comfortably warm. A big stove glowed in the middle of it, and the atmosphere was permeated with the smell of hot iron, stale tobacco, and the exudations from resinous boards.

Grant and his daughter had called when driving back from a distant farm, and Trooper Flett had returned to the homestead after a futile search for the liquor smugglers. He was not characterized by mental brilliancy, but his persevering patience atoned for that, and his superior officers considered him a sound and useful man. Sitting lazily in an easy chair after a long day's ride in the nipping frost, he discoursed upon the situation.

"Things aren't looking good," he said. "We've had two cases of cattle-killing in the last month, besides some horses missing, and a railroad contractor knocked senseless with an empty bottle; and nobody's locked up yet."

"I don't think you have any reason to be proud of it," Edgar broke in.

Flett spread out his hands in expostulation.

"It's not our fault. I could put my hands on half a dozen men who're at the bottom of the trouble; but what would be the use of that, when the blamed jury would certainly let them off? In a case of this kind, our system of justice is mighty apt to break down. It's a pet idea of mine."

"How would you propose to alter it?" Edgar asked, to lead him on.

"If we must have a jury, I'd like to pick them, and they'd be men who'd lost some stock. You could depend on them."

"There's something to be said for that," Grant admitted with a dry smile.

"This is how we're fixed," Flett went on. "We're up against a small, but mighty smart, hard crowd; we know them all right, but we can't get after them. You must make good all you say in court, and we can't get folks to help us. They'd rather mind the store, have a game of pool, or chop their cordwood."

"I can think of a few exceptions," Edgar said. "Mrs. Nelson, for example. One could hardly consider her apathetic."

"That woman's dangerous! When we were working up things against Beamish, she must make him look like a persecuted victim. She goes too far; the others won't go far enough. Guess they're afraid of getting hurt."

"You couldn't say that of Mr. Hardie," Flora objected.

"No. But some of his people would like to fire him, and he's going to have trouble about his pay. Anyhow, this state of things is pretty hard on us. There's

no use in bringing a man up when you've only got unwilling witnesses."

"What you want is a dramatic conviction," said Edgar sympathetically.

"Sure. It's what we're working for, and we'd get it if everybody backed us up as your partner and Mr. Grant are doing." He turned to George. "My coming back here is a little rough on you."

George smiled.

"I dare say it will be understood by the opposition, but I don't mind. It looks as if I were a marked man already."

A few minutes later Flett went out to attend to his horse; George took Grant into a smaller room which he used for an office; and Edgar and Flora were left alone. The girl sat beside the stove, with a thoughtful air, and Edgar waited for her to speak. Flora inspired him with an admiration which was largely tinged with respect, though, being critical, he sometimes speculated about the cause for this. She was pretty, but her style of beauty was rather severe. She had fine eyes and clearly-cut features, but her face was a little too reposeful and her expression usually somewhat grave; he preferred animation and a dash of coquetry. Her conversation was to the point — she had a way of getting at the truth of a matter — but there was nevertheless a certain reserve in it and he thought it might have been more sparkling. He had discovered some time ago that adroit flattery and hints that his devotion was hers to command only afforded her calm amusement.

"Mr. Lansing looks a little worried," she said at length.

"It strikes me as only natural," Edgar replied. "He has had a steer killed since the rustlers shot the bull; we have foiled one or two more attempts only by keeping a good lookout, and he knows that he lies open to any new attack that may be made on him. His position isn't what you could call comfortable."

"I hardly think that would disturb your comrade very much."

Edgar saw that she would not be put off with an inadequate explanation, and he was a little surprised that she did not seem to mind displaying her interest in George.

"Then," he said, "for another thing, he's disappointed about having to give up an English visit he had looked forward to."

He saw a gleam that suggested comprehension in her eyes.

"You mean that he is badly disappointed?"

"Yes," said Edgar; "I really think he is."

He left her to make what she liked of this, and he imagined that there was something to be inferred from it. He thought it might be wise to give her a hint that George's affections were already engaged.

"Besides," he resumed, "it's no secret that the loss of his harvest hit him pretty hard. We'll have to curtail our spring operation in several ways and study economy."

Flora glanced toward the door of the room her father had entered with George. Edgar thought she had done so unconsciously; but it was somewhat suggestive, though he could not see what it implied.

"Well," she said, "I'm inclined to believe that he'll get over his difficulties."

"So am I," Edgar agreed. "George isn't easy to defeat."

In the meanwhile Grant sat in the next room, smoking thoughtfully and asking George rather direct questions about his farming.

"I've made some inquiries about that new wheat your English botanist friend reported on," he said at length. "Our experimental farm people strongly recommend it, and there's a man I wrote to who can't say enough in its favor. You'll sow it this spring?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to stick to the common kinds," George said gloomily. "I've a pretty big acreage to crop and that special seed is remarkably dear."

"That's so," Grant agreed. "As a matter of fact, they haven't quite made their arrangements for putting it on the market yet, and the surest way to get some is to bid for a round lot. After what I'd heard, I wired a Winnipeg agent and he has promised to send me on what looks like more than I can use. Now I'll be glad to let you have as much as you want for your lightest land."

George felt grateful. He did not think that this methodical man had made any careless mistake over his order; but he hesitated.

"Thanks," he said. "Still, it doesn't get over the main difficulty."

"I guess it does. You would have had to pay money down for the seed, and I'll be glad to let the thing stand over until you have thrashed out. The price doesn't count; you can give me back as many bushels as you get."

"Then," said George with a slight flush, "you're more generous than wise. They haven't produced a

wheat yet that will stand drought and hail. Suppose I have another year like last? I'm sorry I can't let you run this risk."

"We'll quit pretending. I owe a little to the country that has made me what I am, and these new hardy wheats are going to play a big part in its development. I want to see them tried on the poorest land."

"That's a good reason. I believe it goes some way, but I hardly think it accounts for everything."

His companion looked at him with fixed directness.

"Then, if you must be satisfied, you're my neighbor; you have had blamed hard luck and I like the way you're standing up to it. If anybody's on meaner soil than yours I want to see it. Anyway, here's the seed; take what you need, pay me back when you're able. Guess you're not too proud to take a favor that's gladly offered."

"I'd be a most ungrateful brute if I refused," George replied with feeling.

"That's done with," Grant said firmly; and soon afterward he and George returned to the other room.

After a while he went out with Edgar to look at a horse, and George turned to Flora.

"Your father has taken a big weight off my mind, and I'm afraid I hardly thanked him," he said.

"Then it was a relief?" she asked, and it failed to strike him as curious that she seemed to know what he was alluding to.

"Yes," he declared; "I feel ever so much more confident now that I can get that seed. The fact that it was offered somehow encouraged me."

"You never expected anything of the kind? I've sometimes thought you're apt to stand too much alone.

You don't attach enough importance to your friends."

"Perhaps not," admitted George. "I've been very wrong in this instance; but I suppose one naturally prefers to hide one's difficulties."

"I don't think the feeling's universal. But you would, no doubt, be more inclined to help other people out of their troubles."

George looked a little embarrassed, and she changed the subject with a laugh.

"Come and see us when you can find the time. On the last occasion, you sent your partner over."

"I'd made an appointment with an implement man when I got your father's note. Anyway, I should have fancied that Edgar would have made a pretty good substitute."

"Mr. West is a favorite of ours; he's amusing and excellent company, as far as he goes."

Her tone conveyed a hint that Edgar had his limitations and he was not an altogether satisfactory exchange for his partner; but George laughed.

"He now and then goes farther than I would care to venture."

Flora looked at him with faint amusement.

"Yes," she said. "That's one of the differences between you; you're not assertive. It has struck me that you don't always realize your value."

"Would you like one to insist on it?"

"Oh," she said, "there's a happy medium; but I'm getting rather personal, and I hear the others coming."

She drove away a little later, and when Flett had gone to bed George and Edgar sat talking a while beside the stove.

"Grant's a staunch friend, and I'm more impressed with Flora every time I see her," said the lad. "She's pleasant to talk to, she can harness and handle a team with any one; but for all that, you recognize a trace of what I can only call the grand manner in her. Though I understand that she has been to the old country, it's rather hard to see how she got it."

George signified agreement. Miss Grant was undoubtedly characterized by a certain grace and now and then by an elusive hint of stateliness. It was a thing quite apart from self-assertion; a gracious quality, which he had hitherto noticed only in the bearing of a few elderly English ladies of station.

"I suppose you thanked her for that seed?" Edgar resumed.

"I said I was grateful to her father."

"I've no doubt you took the trouble to mark the distinction. It might have been more considerate if you had divided your gratitude."

"What do you mean?"

"It's hardly likely that the idea of helping you in that particular way originated with Alan Grant, though I shouldn't be surprised if he had been allowed to think it did."

George looked surprised and Edgar laughed.

"You needn't mind. It's most improbable that Miss Grant either wished or expected you to understand. She's a very intelligent young lady."

"It strikes me that you talk too much," George said severely.

He went out, feeling a little disturbed by what Edgar had told him, but unable to analyze his sensations. Putting on his furs, he proceeded to look

around the stable, as he had fallen into a habit of doing before he went to rest. There was a clear moon in the sky, and although the black shadow of the buildings stretched out across the snow, George on approaching one noticed a few footprints that led toward it. There were numerous other tracks about, but he thought that those he was looking at had been made since he had last entered the house. This, however, did not surprise him, for Flett had recently visited the stable.

On entering the building, George stopped to feel for a lantern which was kept on a shelf near the door. The place was very dark and pleasantly warm by contrast with the bitter frost outside, and he could smell the peppermint in the prairie hay. Familiar sounds reached him — the soft rattle of a shaking rope, the crackle of crushed straw — but they were rather more numerous than usual, and while he listened one or two of the horses began to move restlessly.

The lantern was not to be found; George wondered whether Flett had carelessly forgotten to replace it. He felt his way from stall to stall, letting his hand fall on the hind quarters of the horses as he passed. They were all in their places, including Flett's gray, which lashed out at him when he touched it; there was nothing to excite suspicion, but when he reached the end of the row he determined to strike a match and look for the lantern. He was some time feeling for the match-box under his furs, and while he did so he heard a soft rustling in the stall nearest the door. This was curious, for the stall, being a cold one, was unoccupied, and there was something significantly stealthy in the sound; but it ceased, and while he lis-

tened with strained attention a horse moved and snorted. Then, while he fumbled impatiently at a button of his skin coat which would not come loose, an icy draught stole into the building.

It was obvious that the door was open; he had left it shut.

Breaking off his search for the matches, he made toward the entrance and sprang out. There was nobody upon the moonlit snow, and the shadows were hardly deep enough to conceal a lurking man. He ran toward the end of the rather long building; but, as it happened, he had to make a round to avoid a stack of wood and a wagon on the way. When he turned the corner, the other side of the stable was clear in the moonlight and, so far as he could see, the snow about it was untrodden. It looked as if he had made for the wrong end of the building, and he retraced his steps toward a barn that stood near its opposite extremity. Running around it, he saw nobody, nor any footprints that seemed to have been recently made; and while he stood wondering what he should do next, Grierson appeared between him and the house.

"Were you in the stables a minute or two ago?" George called to him.

"No," said the other approaching. "I'd just come out for some wood when I saw you run round the barn."

George gave him a brief explanation, and the man looked about.

"Perhaps we'd better search the buildings; if there was any stranger prowling round, he might have dodged you in the shadow. It's hardly likely he'd

make for the prairie; the first clump of brush big enough to hide a man is a quarter of a mile off."

They set about the search, but found nobody, and George stopped outside the last building with a puzzled frown on his face.

"It's very strange," he said. "I left the door shut; I couldn't be mistaken."

"Look!" cried Grierson, clutching his arm. "There's no mistaking about that!"

Turning sharply, George saw a dim mounted figure cross the crest of a low rise some distance away and vanish beyond it.

"The fellow must have run straight for the poplar scrub, keeping the house between you and him," Grierson explained. "He'd have left his horse among the brush."

"I suppose that was it," George said angrily. "As there's no chance of overtaking him, we'll have a look at the horses, with a light, and then let Flett know."

There was nothing wrong in the stable, where they found the lantern George had looked for flung down in the empty stall, and in a very short space of time after they had called him Flett appeared. He walked round the buildings and examined some of the footprints with a light, and then he turned to George.

"Looks like an Indian by his stride," he said. "Guess I'll have to saddle up and start."

"You could hardly come up with the fellow; he'll have struck into one of the beaten trails, so as to leave no tracks," Edgar pointed out.

"That's so," said Flett. "I don't want to come up with him. It wouldn't be any use when your partner and Grierson couldn't swear to the man."

"What could have been his object?" George asked. "He seems to have done no harm."

"He wanted to see if my gray was still in the stable," Flett said dryly. "His friends have some business they'd sooner I didn't butt into fixed up somewhere else."

"But you have no idea where?"

"I haven't; that's the trouble. There are three or four different trails I'd like to watch, and I quite expect to strike the wrong one. Then, if the man knows you saw him, he might take his friends warning to change their plans. All the same, I'll get off."

He rode away shortly afterward, and as the others went back toward the house Edgar laughed.

"I don't think being a police trooper has many attractions in winter," he remarked. "Hiding in a bluff for several hours with the temperature forty degrees below, on the lookout for fellows who have probably gone another way, strikes me as a very unpleasant occupation."

CHAPTER XXII

THE SPREAD OF DISORDER

FLETT spent a bitter night, keeping an unavailing watch among the willows where a lonely trail dipped into a ravine. Not a sound broke the stillness of the white prairie, and realizing that the men he wished to surprise had taken another path, he left his hiding-place shortly before daylight. He was almost too cold and stiff to mount; but as his hands and feet tingled painfully, it was evident that they had escaped frostbite, and that was something to be thankful for.

Reaching an outlying farm, he breakfasted and rested a while, after which he rode on to the Indian reservation, where he found signs of recent trouble. A man to whom he was at first refused access lay with a badly battered face in a shack which stood beside a few acres of roughly broken land; another man suffering from what looked like an ax wound sat huddled in dirty blankets in a teepee. It was obvious that a fight, which Flett suspected was the result of a drunken orgy, had been in progress not long before; but he could find no liquor nor any man actually under its influence, though the appearance of several suggested that they were recovering from a debauch. He discovered, however, in a poplar thicket the hide of a steer, from which a recent breeze had swept its covering of snow. This was a serious matter, and though

the brand had been removed, Flett identified the skin as having belonged to an animal reported to him as missing.

He had now, when dusk was approaching, two charges of assault and one of cattle-killing to make, and it would not be prudent to remain upon the reservation during the night with anybody he arrested. The Indians were in a sullen, threatening mood; it was difficult to extract any information, and Flett was alone. He was, however, not to be daunted by angry looks or ominous mutterings, and by persistently questioning the injured men he learned enough to warrant his making two arrests; though he decided that the matter of the hide must be dropped for the present.

It was in a state of nervous tension that he mounted and drove his prisoners on a few paces in front of him. If he could get them into the open, he thought he would be safe, but the reservation was, for the most part, a tract of brush and bluff, pierced by ravines, among which he half expected an attempt would be made to facilitate their escape. For all that, he was, so far as appearances went, very calm and grim when he set out, and his prisoners, being ahead, did not notice that he searched each taller patch of brush they entered with apprehensive glances. Nor did they see his hand drop to his pistol-butt when something moved in the bushes as they went down the side of a dark declivity.

There was, however, no interference, and he felt more confident when he rode out into the moonlight which flooded the glittering prairie. Here he could deal with any unfavorable developments; but it was

several leagues to the nearest shelter, and the Indians did not seem inclined to travel fast. The half-frozen constable would gladly have walked, only that he felt more master of the situation upon his horse. Mile after mile, they crossed the vast white waste, without a word being spoken, except when the shivering man sternly bade his prisoners, "Get on!"

Hand-cuffed as they were, he dare not relax his vigilance nor let them fall back too near him; and he had spent the previous night in the bitter frost. At times he felt painfully drowsy, but he had learned to overcome most bodily weaknesses, and his eyes only left the dark, plodding figures in front of him when he swept a searching glance across the plain. Nothing moved on it, and only the soft crunch of snow broke the dreary silence. At last, a cluster of low buildings rose out of the waste, and soon afterward Flett got down with difficulty and demanded shelter. The rudely awakened farmer gave him the use of his kitchen, in which a stove was burning; and while the Indians went to sleep on the floor, Flett, choosing an uncomfortable upright chair, lighted his pipe and sat down to keep another vigil. When dawn broke, his eyes were still open, though his face was a little haggard and very weary.

He obtained a conviction for assault; but, as the charges of cattle-killing and being in possession of liquor had to be dropped, this was small consolation. It left the men he considered responsible absolutely untouched.

Afterward, he played a part in other somewhat similar affairs, for offenses were rapidly becoming more numerous among both Indians and mean whites;

but in spite of his efforts the gang he suspected managed to evade the grip of the law. Flett, however, was far from despairing; he waited his time and watched.

While he did so, spring came, unusually early. A warm west wind swept the snow away and for a week or two the softened prairie was almost impassable to vehicles. Then the wind veered to the northwest with bright sunshine, the soil began to dry, and George set out on a visit to Brandon where he had some business to transact.

Reaching Sage Butte in the afternoon, he found it suffering from the effects of the thaw. A swollen creek had converted the ground on one side of the track into a shallow lake; the front street resembled a muskeg, furrowed deep by sinking wheels. The vehicles outside the hotels were covered with sticky mire; the high, plank sidewalks were slippery with it, and foot passengers when forced to leave them sank far up their long boots; one or two of the stores were almost cut off by the pools. It rained between gleams of sunshine, and masses of dark cloud rolled by above the dripping town and wet prairie, which had turned a dingy gray.

As he was proceeding along one sidewalk, George met Hardie, and it struck him that the man was looking dejected and worn.

"Will you come back with me and wait for supper?" he asked. "I'd be glad of a talk."

"I think not," said George. "You're on the far side of the town and there are two streets to cross; you see, I'm going to Brandon, and I'll take enough gumbo into the cars with me, as it is. Then my train

leaves in half an hour. I suppose I mustn't ask you to come into the Queen's?"

"No," said the clergyman. "Our old guard won't tolerate the smallest compromise with the enemy, and there's a good deal to be said for their point of view. After all, half-measures have seldom much result; a man must be one thing or another. But we might try the new waiting-room at the station."

The little room proved to be dry and comparatively clean, besides being furnished with nicely made and comfortable seats. Leaning back in one near the stove, George turned to his companion.

"How are things going round here?" he asked.

"Very much as I expected; we tried and failed to apply a check in time, and of late we have had a regular outbreak of lawlessness. At first sight, it's curious, considering that three-fourths of the inhabitants of the district are steady, industrious folk, and a proportion of the rest are capable of being useful citizens."

"Then how do you account for the disorder?"

Hardie looked thoughtful.

"I suppose we all have a tendency to follow a lead, which is often useful in an organized state of society; though it depends on the lead. By way of counterbalance, we have a certain impatience of restraint. Granting this, you can see that when the general tone of a place is one of sobriety and order, people who have not much love for either find it more or less easy to conform. But, if you set them a different example, one that slackens restrictions instead of imposing them, they'll follow it, and it somehow seems to be the rule that the turbulent element exerts the stronger in-

fluence. Anyway, it becomes the more prominent. You hear of the fellow who steals a horse in a daring manner; the man who quietly goes on with his plowing excites no notice."

"One must agree with that," George replied. "Popular feeling's fickle; a constant standard is needed to adjust it by."

Hardie smiled.

"It was given us long ago. But I can't believe that there's much general sympathy with these troublesome fellows. What I complain of is popular apathy; nobody feels it his business to interfere; though this state of things can't continue. The patience of respectable people will wear out; and then one can look for drastic developments."

"In the meanwhile, the other crowd are having their fling."

Hardie nodded.

"That's unfortunately true, though the lawbreakers have now and then come off second-best. A few days ago, Wilkie, the station-agent, was sitting in his office when a man who had some grievance against the railroad walked up to the window. Wilkie told him he must send his claim to Winnipeg, and the fellow retorted that he would have satisfaction right away out of the agent's hide. With that, he climbed in through the window; and I must confess to a feeling of satisfaction when I heard that he left the station in need of medical assistance. A week earlier, Taunton, of the store, was walking home along the track in the dark after collecting some of his accounts, when a man jumped out from behind a stock of ties with a pistol and demanded his wallet. Taunton, taken by

surprise, produced a wad of bills, but the thief was a little too eager or careless in seizing them, for Taunton grabbed the pistol and got his money back. After that, he marched the man three miles along the track and into his store. I don't know what happened then, but I heard that there were traces of a pretty lively scuffle."

George laughed, but his companion continued more gravely:

"Then we have had a number of small disturbances when the men from the new link line came into town — they've graded the track to within a few miles now — and I hold Beamish responsible; they haven't encouraged these fellows at the Queen's. In fact, I mean to walk over and try to get a few words with them as soon as I leave you."

"One would hardly think Saturday evening a very good time," George commented.

His train came in shortly afterward, and when it had gone Hardie went home for a rubber coat, and then took the trail leading out of the settlement. He was forced to trudge through the tangled grass beside it because the soft gumbo soil stuck to his boots in great black lumps, and the patches of dwarf brush through which he must smash made progress laborious. After a while, however, he saw a long trail of black smoke ahead, and sounds of distant activity grew steadily louder.

There was an angry red glare on the western horizon, though the light was beginning to fade, when he reached the end of the new line and found a crowd of men distributing piles of gravel and spiking down the rails which ran back, gleaming in the sunset, lurid,

straight and level, across the expanse of grass, until they were lost in the shadowy mass of a bluff. Near the men stood a few jaded teams and miry wagons; farther on a row of freight-cars occupied a side-track, a little smoke rising from the stacks on the roofs of one or two. Their doors were open, and on passing, Hardie noticed the dirty blue blankets and the litter of wet clothing in the rude bunks. As he approached the last car, which served as store and office, a man sprang down upon the line. He wore wet long boots and an old rubber coat stained with soil, but there was a stamp of authority upon his bronzed face.

"How are you getting on, Mr. Farren?" Hardie inquired.

"Slowly," said the other; "can't catch up on schedule contract time. We've had rain and heavy soil ever since we began. The boys have been giving me some trouble, too."

"You won't mind my having a few words with them?"

"Why, no," said Farren. "Guess they need it; but I'm most afraid you'll be wasting time. The Scandinavians, who're quiet enough and might agree with you, can't understand, and it's quite likely that the crowd you want to get at won't listen. Anyway, you can try it after they've dubbed the load off the gravel train; she's coming now."

He pointed toward a smear of smoke that trailed away across the prairie. It grew rapidly blacker and nearer, and presently a grimy locomotive with a long string of clattering cars behind it came down the uneven track. It had hardly stopped when the sides of the low cars dropped, and a plow moved forward from

one to another, hurling off masses of gravel that fell with a roar. Then the train, backing out, came to a standstill again, and a swarm of men became busy about the line. Dusk was falling, but the blaze of the great electric light on the locomotive streamed along the track. While Hardie stood watching, half a dozen men dropped their tools and walked up to his companion.

"We're through with our lot," announced one. "We're going to the Butte and we'll trouble you for a sub of two dollars a man."

"You won't get it," said Farren shortly. "I want the ties laid on the next load."

"Then you can send somebody else to fix them. We're doing more than we booked for."

"You're getting paid for it."

"Shucks!" said the other contemptuously. "What we want is an evening at the Butte; and we're going to have it! Hand over the two dollars."

"No, sir," said Farren. "I've given in once or twice and I've got no work out of you for most two days afterward. You can quit tie-laying, if you insist; but you'll get no money until pay-day."

One of the men pulled out his watch.

"Boys," he said, "if we stop here talking, there won't be much time left for a jag when we make the Butte. Are you going to let him bluff you?"

The growl from the others was ominous. They had been working long hours at high pressure in the rain, and had suffered in temper. One of them strode forward and grasped Farren's shoulder.

"Now," he demanded, "hand out! It's our money."

There was only one course open to Farren. His position was not an easy one, and if he yielded, his authority would be gone.

His left arm shot out and the man went down with a crash. Then the others closed with him and a savage struggle began.

Hardie laid hold of a man who had picked up an iron bar, and managed to wrest it from him, but another struck him violently on the head, and he had a very indistinct idea of what went on during the next minute or two. There was a struggling knot of men pressed against the side of the car, but it broke up when more figures came running up and one man cried out sharply as he was struck by a heavy lump of gravel. Then Hardie found himself kneeling beside Farren, who lay senseless near the wheels with the blood running down his set white face. Behind him stood the panting locomotive engineer, trying to hold back the growing crowd.

"Looks pretty bad," he said. "What's to be done with him?"

"We had better get him into his bunk," directed Hardie. "Then I'll make for the Butte as fast as I can and bring the doctor out."

"It would take two hours," objected the engineer, as he gently removed Farren's hat. "Strikes me as a mighty ugly gash; the thing must be looked to right away. If I let her go, throttle wide, we ought to make Carson in half an hour, and they've a smart doctor there." He said something to his fireman and added: "Get hold; we'll take him along."

It looked as if the outbreak had not met with general approval, for a number of the bystanders offered their

help and the injured man was carefully carried to the locomotive.

"I'll run the cars along as far as the gravel pit; then I can book the journey," the engineer said to Hardie. "But as I can't get off at the other end, you'll have to come along."

Hardie wondered how he would get back, but that was not a matter of great consequence, though he had to preach at Sage Butte in the morning, and he climbed up when Farren had been lifted into the cab. Then he sat down on the floor plates and rested the unconscious man's head and shoulders against his knees as the engine began to rock furiously. Nothing was said for a while; the uproar made by the banging cars would have rendered speech inaudible, but when they had been left behind, the engineer looked at Hardie.

"In a general way, it's not the thing to interfere in a row with a boss," he said. "Still, four to two, with two more watching out for a chance to butt in, is pretty steep odds, and Farren's a straight man. I felt quite good when I hit one of those fellows with a big lump of gravel."

Hardie could understand his sensations and did not rebuke him. So far as his experience went, the western locomotive crews were of an excellent type, and he was willing to admit that there were occasions when the indignation of an honest man might be expressed in vigorous action.

"It was really four to one, which makes the odds heavier," he said.

"I guess not," rejoined the engineer with a smile. "You were laying into one of them pretty lively as I ran up."

Hardie felt a little disconcerted. Having been partly dazed by the blow he had received, he had no clear recollection of the part he had taken in the scrimmage, though he had been conscious of burning anger when Farren was struck down. It was, however, difficult to believe that the engineer had been mistaken, because the locomotive lamp had lighted the track brilliantly.

"Anyway, one of them put his mark on you," resumed his companion. "Did you notice it, Pete?"

"Sure," said the grinning fireman; "big lump on his right cheek." He fumbled in a box and handed a tool to Hardie. "Better hold that spanner to it, if you're going to preach to-morrow. But how's Farren?"

"No sign of consciousness. The sooner we can get him into a doctor's hands, the better."

"Stir her up," ordered the engineer, and nodded when his comrade swung back the fire-door and hurled in coal. Then he turned to Hardie. "We're losing no time. She's running to beat the Imperial Limited clip, and the track's not worked down yet into its bed."

Hardie, looking about for a few moments, thought the speed could not safely be increased. There was a scream of wind about the cab, though when he had stood upon the track the air had been almost still; a bluff, which he knew was a large one, leaped up, hung over the line, and rushed away behind; the great engine was rocking and jolting so that he could hardly maintain his position, and the fireman shuffled about with the erratic motion. Then Hardie busied himself trying to protect Farren from the shaking, until the

scream of the whistle broke through the confused sounds and the pace diminished. The bell began to toll, and, rising to his feet, Hardie saw a cluster of lights flitting back toward him. Shortly afterward they stopped beside a half-built row of elevators.

"Guess you'll have to be back to-morrow," the engineer said.

Hardie nodded.

"I've been rather worried about it. It would take me all night to walk."

"That's so," agreed the other. "All you have to do is to see Farren safe in the doctor's hands and leave the rest to me. I've got to have some water, for one thing." He turned to his fireman. "We'll put in that new journal babbit; she's not running sweet."

The clergyman was inclined to believe that the repair was not strictly needed, though it would account for a delay; but one or two of the station hands had reached the engine and, following instructions, they lifted Farren down, and wheeled him on a baggage truck to the doctor's house. The doctor seemed to have no doubt of the man's recovery but said that he must not be moved again for a day or two; and Hardie went back to the station, reassured and less troubled than he had been for some time. The attitude of the engineer, fireman, and construction gang, was encouraging. It confirmed his belief that the lawless element was tolerated rather than regarded with sympathy, and the patience of the remainder of the community would become exhausted before long. Though he admitted the influence of a bad example, he had firm faith in the rank and file.

CHAPTER XXIII

A HARMLESS CONSPIRACY

ON the evening that George left for Brandon, Edgar drove over to the Grant homestead.

"It's Saturday night, my partner's gone, and I felt I deserved a little relaxation," he explained.

"It's something to be able to feel that; the men who opened up this wheat-belt never got nor wanted anything of the kind," Grant rejoined. "But as supper's nearly ready, you have come at the right time."

Edgar turned to Flora.

"Your father always makes me feel that I belong to a decadent age. One can put up with it from him, because he's willing to live up to his ideas, which is not a universal rule, so far as my experience of moralizers goes. Anyhow, I'll confess that I'm glad to arrive in time for a meal. The cooking at our place might be improved; George, I regret to say, never seems to notice what he eats."

"That's a pretty good sign," said Grant.

"It strikes me as a failing for which I have to bear part of the consequences."

Flora laughed.

"If you felt that you had to make an excuse for coming, couldn't you have made a more flattering one?"

"Ah!" said Edgar, "you have caught me out.

But I could give you a number of better reasons. It isn't my fault you resent compliments."

Flora rose and they entered the room where the hired men were gathering for the meal. When it was over, they returned to the smaller room and found seats near an open window, Grant smoking, Flora embroidering, while Edgar mused as he watched her. Dressed in some simple, light-colored material, which was nevertheless tastefully cut, she made an attractive picture in the plainly furnished room, the walls of which made an appropriate frame of uncovered native pine, for he always associated her and her father with the land to which they belonged. There was nothing voluptuous in any line of the girl's face or figure; the effect was chastely severe, and he knew that it conveyed a reliable hint of her character. This was not marked by coldness, but rather by an absence of superficial warmth. The calmness of her eyes spoke of depth and balance. She was steadfast and consistent; a daughter of the stern, snow-scourged North.

Then he glanced at the prairie, which ran west, streaked with ochre stubble in the foreground, then white and silvery gray, with neutral smears of poplar bluffs, to the blaze of crimson where it cut the sky. It was vast and lonely; at first sight a hard, forbidding land that broke down the slack of purpose and drove out the sybarite. He had sometimes shrunk from it, but it was slowly fastening its hold on him, and he now understood how it molded the nature of its inhabitants. For the most part, they were far from effusive; some of their ways were primitive and perhaps slightly barbarous, but there was vigor and staunchness in them. They stuck to the friends they had

tried and were admirable in action; it was when, as they said, they were up against it that one learned most about the strong hearts of these men and women.

"Lansing will be away some days," Grant said presently. "What are you going to do next week?"

"Put up the new fence, most likely. The land's a little soft for plowing yet."

"That's so. As you'll have no use for the teams, it would be a good time to haul in some of the seed wheat. I've a carload coming out."

"A carload!" exclaimed Edgar in surprise, remembering the large carrying capacity of the Canadian freight-cars. "At the price they've been asking, it must have cost you a pile."

"It did," said Grant. "I generally try to get down to bed-rock figure, but I don't mind paying it. The fellow who worked up that wheat deserves his money."

"You mean the seed's worth its price if the crop escapes the frost?"

"That wasn't quite all I meant. I'm willing to pay the man for the work he has put into it. Try to figure the cross fertilizations he must have made, the varieties he's tried and cut out, and remember it takes time to get a permanent strain, and wheat makes only one crop a year. If the stuff's as good as it seems, the fellow's done something he'll never be paid for. Anyway, he's welcome to my share."

"There's no doubt about your admiration for hard work," declared Edgar. "As it happens, you have found putting it into practise profitable, which may have had some effect."

Grant's eyes twinkled.

"Now you have got hold of the wrong idea. You have raised a different point."

"Then, for instance, would you expect a hired man who had no interest in the crop to work as hard as you would?"

"Yes," Grant answered rather grimly; "I'd see he did. Though I don't often pay more than I can help, I wouldn't blame him for screwing up his wages to the last cent he could get; but if it was only half the proper rate, he'd have to do his share. A man's responsible to the country he's living in, not to his employer; the latter's only an agent, and if he gets too big a commission, it doesn't affect the case."

"It affects the workman seriously."

"He and his master must settle that point between them." Grant paused and spread out his hands forcibly. "You have heard what the country west of old Fort Garby — it's Winnipeg now — was like thirty years ago. Do you suppose all the men who made it what it is got paid for what they did? Canada couldn't raise the money, and quite a few of them got frozen to death."

It struck Edgar as a rather stern doctrine, but he admitted the truth of it; what was more, he felt that George and this farmer had many views in common. Grant, however, changed the subject.

"You had better take your two heavy teams in to the Butte on Monday; I've ordered my freight there until the sandy trails get loose again. Bring a couple of spare horses along. We'll load you up and you can come in again."

"Two Clover-leaf wagons will haul a large lot of seed in a double journey."

"It's quite likely you'll have to make a third. Don't you think you ought to get this hauling done before Lansing comes home?"

A light broke in on Edgar. Grant was, with some reason, occasionally called hard; but he was always just, and it was evident that he could be generous. He meant to make his gift complete before George could protest.

"Yes," acquiesced Edgar; "it would be better, because George might want the teams, and for other reasons."

The farmer nodded.

"That's fixed. The agent has instructions to deliver."

Edgar left the homestead an hour later and spent the Sunday resting, because he knew that he would need all of his energy during the next few days. At dawn on the following morning he and Grierson started for Sage Butte, and on their arrival loaded the wagons and put up their horses for the night. They set out again before sunrise and were glad of the spare team when they came to places where all the horses could scarcely haul one wagon through the soft black soil. There were other spots where the graded road sloped steeply to the hollow out of which it had been dug, and with the lower wheels sinking they had to hold up the side of the vehicle. Great clods clung to the wheels; the men, plodding at the horses' heads, could scarcely pull their feet out of the mire, and they were thankful when they left the fences behind and could seek a slightly sounder surface on the grass.

Even here, progress was difficult. The stalks were tough and tangled and mixed with stiff, dwarf scrub,

which grew in some spots almost to one's waist. There were little rises, and hollows into which the wagons jolted violently, and here and there they must skirt a bluff or strike back into the cut-up trail which traversed it. Toward noon they reached a larger wood, where the trees crowded thick upon the track. When Edgar floundered into it, there appeared to be no bottom. Getting back to the grass, he surveyed the scene with strong disgust; he had not quite got over his English fastidiousness.

Leafless branches met above the trail, and little bays strewn with trampled brush which showed where somebody had tried to force a drier route, indented the ranks of slender trunks. Except for these, the strip of sloppy black gumbo led straight through the wood, interspersed with gleaming pools. Having seen enough, Edgar beckoned Grierson and climbed a low hillock. The bluff was narrow where the road pierced it, but it was long and the ground was rough and covered with a smaller growth for some distance on its flanks.

"There's no way of getting round," he said. "I suppose six horses ought to haul one wagon through that sloo."

"It looks a bit doubtful," Grierson objected. "We mightn't be able to pull her out if she got in very deep. We could dump half the load and come back for it."

"And make four journeys? It's not to be thought of; two's a good deal too many."

They yoked the three teams to the first wagon, which promptly sank a long way up its high wheels, and while the men waded nearly knee-deep at their heads, the straining horses made thirty or forty yards.

Then Edgar sank over the top of his long boots and the hub of one wheel got ominously low.

"They've done more than one could have expected; I hate to use the whip, but we must get out of this before she goes in altogether," he said.

Grierson nodded. He was fond of his horses, which were obviously distressed, and flecked with spume and lather where the traces chafed their wet flanks; but to be merciful would only increase their task.

The whip-cracks rang out like pistol-shots; and, splashing, snorting, struggling, amid showers of mire, they drew the wagon out of its sticky bed. They made another dozen yards; and then Grierson turned the horses into one of the embayments where there was brush that would support the wheels. Edgar sat down, breathless, upon a fallen trunk.

"People at home have two quite unfounded ideas about this country," he said disgustedly. "The first is that money is easily picked up here — which doesn't seem to need any remark; the second is that they have only to send over the slackers and slouchers to reform them. In my opinion, a few doses of this kind of thing would be enough to fill them with a horror of work." He replaced the pipe he had taken out. "It's a pity, Grierson, but we can't sit here and smoke."

They went on and nearly capsized the wagon in a pool, the bottom of which was too soft to give them foothold while they held up the vehicle, but they got through it and one or two others, and presently came out, dripping from the waist down, on to the drier prairie. Then Edgar turned and viewed their track.

"It won't bear much looking at; we had better unyoke," he said. "If anybody had told me in England that I'd ever flounder through a place like that, I'd —"

He paused, seeking for words to express himself fittingly.

"You'd have called him a liar," Grierson suggested.

"That hardly strikes me as strong enough," Edgar laughed.

They had spent two hours in the bluff when they brought the last load through, and sitting down in a patch of scrub they took out their lunch. After a while Edgar flung off his badly splashed hat and jacket and lay down in the sunshine.

"The thing's done; the pity is it must be done again to-morrow," he remarked. "In the meanwhile, we'll forget it; I'll draw a veil over my feelings."

They had finished lunch and lighted their pipes when a buggy appeared from behind a projecting clump of trees and soon afterward Flora Grant pulled up her horse near by. Edgar rose and stood beside the vehicle bareheaded, looking slender and handsome in his loose yellow shirt, duck overalls, and long boots, though the marks of the journey were freely scattered about him. Flora glanced at the jaded teams and the miry wagons and smiled at the lad. She had a good idea of the difficulties he had overcome.

"The trail must have been pretty bad," she said. "I struck off to the east by the creek, but I don't think you could get through with a load."

"It was quite bad enough," Edgar assured her.

Flora looked thoughtful.

"You have only two wagons; we must try to send you another, though our teams are busy. Didn't you say Mr. Lansing would be back in a day or two?"

"I did, but I got a note this morning saying he thought he had better go on to Winnipeg, if I could get along all right. I told him to go and stop as long as he likes. Considering the state of the trails, I thought that was wise."

Flora smiled. She knew what he meant, since they had agreed that all the seed must be hauled in before his comrade's return.

"I'm not going to thank you; it would be difficult, and George can ride over and do so when he comes home," Edgar resumed. "I know he'll be astonished when he sees the granary."

"If he comes only to express his gratitude, I'm inclined to believe my father would rather he stayed at home."

"I can believe it; but I've an idea that Mr. Grant is not the only person to whom thanks are due."

Flora looked at him sharply, but she made no direct answer.

"Your partner," she said, "compels one's sympathy."

"And one's liking. I don't know how he does so, and it isn't from any conscious desire. I suppose it's a gift of his."

Seeing she was interested, he went on with a thoughtful air:

"You see, George isn't witty, and you wouldn't consider him handsome. In fact, sometimes he's inclined to be dull, but you feel that he's the kind of man you can rely on. There's not a trace of mean-

ness in him, and he never breaks his word. In my opinion, he has a number of the useful English virtues."

"What are they, and are they peculiarly English?"

"I'll call them Teutonic; I believe that's their origin. You people and your neighbors across the frontier have your share of them."

"Thanks," smiled Flora. "But you haven't begun the catalogue."

"Things are often easier to recognize than to describe. At the top of the list, and really comprising the rest of it, I'd place, in the language of the country, the practical ability to 'get there.' We're not in the highest degree intellectual; we're not as a rule worshipers of beauty — that's made obvious by the prairie towns — and to be thought poetical makes us shy. In fact, our artistic taste is strongly defective."

"If these are virtues, they're strictly negative ones," Flora pointed out.

"I'm clearing the ground;" said Edgar. "Where we shine is in making the most of material things, turning, for example, these wilds into wheatfields, holding on through your Arctic cold and blazing summer heat. We begin with a tent and an ox-team, and end, in spite of countless obstacles, with a big brick homestead and a railroad or an automobile. Men of the Lansing type follow the same course consistently, even when their interests are not concerned. Once get an idea into their minds, convince them that it's right, and they'll transform it into determined action. If they haven't tools, they'll make them or find something that will serve; effort counts for nothing; the purpose will be carried out."

Flora noticed the enthusiastic appreciation of his comrade which his somewhat humorous speech revealed, and she thought it justified.

"One would imagine Mr. Lansing to be resolute," she said. "I dare say it's fortunate; he had a heavy loss to face last year."

"Yes," returned Edgar. "As you see, he's going on; though he never expected anything for himself."

"He never expected anything?" Flora repeated incredulously. "What are you saying?"

Edgar realized that he had been injudicious. Flora did not know that Sylvia Marston was still the owner of the farm and he hesitated to enlighten her.

"Well," he said, "George isn't greedy; it isn't in his nature."

"Do you mean that he's a rich man and is merely farming for amusement?"

"Oh, no," said Edgar; "far from it!" He indicated the miry wagons and the torn-up trails. "You wouldn't expect a man to do this kind of thing, if it wasn't needful. The fact is, I don't always express myself very happily; and George has told me that I talk too much."

Flora smiled and drove away shortly afterward, considering what he had said. She had noticed a trace of confusion in his manner and it struck her as significant.

When the buggy had grown small in the distance, Edgar called to Grierson and they went on again.

CHAPTER XXIV

GEORGE FEELS GRATEFUL

WHEN George returned from Winnipeg, Edgar took him to the granary.

"You may as well look at the seed Grant sent you, and then you'll be able to thank him for it," he said. "It's in here; I turned out the common northern stuff you bought to make room."

"Why didn't you put it into the empty place in the barn?" George asked.

"I wasn't sure it would go in; there's rather a lot of it," Edgar explained, with a smile.

George entered the granary and stopped, astonished, when he saw the great pile of bags.

"Is all of that the new seed?" he asked incredulously.

"Every bag," said Edgar, watching him.

George's face reddened. He was stirred by mixed emotions: relief, gratitude, and a feeling of confusion he could not analyze.

"Grant must have sent the whole carload!" he broke out.

"As a matter of fact, he sent most of it. Grierson and I hauled it in; and a tough job we had of it."

"And you took it all, without protesting or sending me word?"

"Yes," said Edgar coolly; "that's precisely what I did. You need the stuff; Grant meant you to have it, and I didn't want to offend him."

"I suppose you have some idea what that seed is worth?"

"I dare say I could guess. Our people at home once experimented with some American seed potatoes at three shillings each. But aren't you putting the matter on a rather low plane?"

George sat down and felt for his pipe.

"I feel that you have played a trick on me. If you had only let me know, I could have objected."

"Just so; that's why I kept quiet," Edgar laughed. "The seed's here and you ought to be thankful. Anyway, Grant won't take it back."

"What have I done that I should get this favor?" George said half aloud.

"That's so characteristic!" Edgar exclaimed. "Why must you always be doing things? Do you imagine that whatever one receives is the result of so much exertion?"

"I don't feel the least interest in such quibbles."

"I can't believe it," Edgar rejoined. "You're more at home when you have a fence to put up, or a strip of new land to break." Then he dropped his bantering tone. "There's nothing to be distressed about. Grant has been pretty generous, and I think he and Flora need thanking."

"That's true; they've made me feel half ashamed. I never expected this."

"In my opinion, the sensation's quite unnecessary. You have given a few people a lift in your time, and I've an optimistic notion that actions of the kind re-

coil on one, even though it's a different person who makes you some return."

"I wish you would stop talking!" George exclaimed impatiently.

Edgar mentally compared Flora Grant with Sylvia, in whom he disbelieved, and found it hard to restrain himself. It was, he felt, a great misfortune that George could not be made to see.

"Oh, well!" he acquiesced. "I could say a good deal more, if I thought it would do any good, but as that doesn't seem likely I'll dry up."

"That's a comfort," George said shortly.

He left the granary in a thoughtful mood, and on the following evening drove over to the Grant homestead. Its owner was busy somewhere outside when he reached it, but Flora received him and he sat down with satisfaction to talk to her. It had become a pleasure to visit the Grants; he felt at home in their house. The absence of all ceremony, the simple Canadian life, had a growing attraction for him. One could get to know these people, which was a different thing from merely meeting them, and George thought this was to some extent the effect of their surroundings. He had always been conscious of a closer and more intimate contact with his friends upon the mountain-side or the banks of some salmon river than he had ever experienced in a club or drawing-room. For all that, Flora sometimes slightly puzzled him. She was free from the affectations and restraints of artificial conventionality, but there was a reserve about her which he failed to penetrate. He wondered what lay behind it and had a curious feeling that Edgar either guessed or knew.

"Did you enjoy your visit to Winnipeg?" she asked.

"It was a pleasant change and I got through my business satisfactorily. Of course, I didn't go for amusement."

Flora laughed.

"So I supposed; you're growing more Canadian every day. But you meant to make a visit to England, which couldn't have had any connection with business, last winter, didn't you?"

George's face grew serious. He had, she thought, not got over his disappointment.

"Yes," he said. "But there was nothing to be done here then."

"So the things that should be done invariably come first with you?"

"In this case — I mean as far as they concern the farm — it's necessary."

Flora considered his answer, studying him quietly, though she had some sewing in her hands. Supposing, as she had once thought, there was some English girl he had longed to see, he could have made the journey later, when his crop had been sown, even though this entailed some neglect of minor operations that required his care. He received, as she had learned with interest, few English letters, so there was nobody to whom he wrote regularly; and yet his disappointment when forced to abandon his visit had obviously been keen. There was, Flora thought, a mystery here.

"After all," she said, "the feeling you have indicated is pretty common in the Canadian wheat-belt."

"Then why should you expect me to be an exception? As a matter of fact, I'm at least as anxious as

my neighbors to be successful. That's partly why I've come over to-night." His voice grew deeper and softer as he continued. "I want to thank you and your father for your surprising generosity."

"Surprising?" responded Flora lightly, though she was stirred by the signs of feeling he displayed. "Do you know you're not altogether complimentary?"

He smiled.

"You'll forgive the slip; when one feels strongly, it's difficult to choose one's words. Anyway, to get that seed, and so much of it, is an immense relief. I'm deeply grateful; the more so because your action was so spontaneous. I haven't a shadow of a claim on you."

Flora put down her sewing and looked at him directly.

"I don't think you ought to say that — do you wish to be considered a stranger?"

"No," George declared impulsively. "It's the last thing I want. Still, you see —"

She was pleased with his eagerness, but she checked him.

"Then, as you have a gift of making friends, you must take the consequences."

"I didn't know I had the gift. My real friends aren't plentiful."

"If you begin to count, you may find them more numerous than you think."

"Those I have made in Canada head the list."

The girl felt a thrill of satisfaction. This was not a compliment; he had spoken from his heart.

"After all, I don't see why you should insist on thanking me as well as my father, who really sent you

the seed." She paused. "You didn't do so on the last occasion; I mean at the time when it was promised to you."

This was correct, and George was conscious of some embarrassment.

"Well," he said firmly, "I think I'm justified."

Flora could not contradict him, and she was glad he felt as he did. She liked his way of sticking to the point; indeed, she was sensible of a strong liking for the man.

During the next minute or two her father came in. He cut short George's thanks, and then took out his pipe.

"I was in at the Butte yesterday," he said. "The police have got the men who knocked Farren out, and Flett says they mean to press for a smart penalty. It's about time they made an example of somebody. When I was in, I fixed it up to turn Langside off his holding."

Flora looked up with interest.

"But how had you the power?" George asked.

"The man owes me four hundred dollars for a horse and some second-hand implements I let him have nearly three years ago."

"But he has broken a big strip of his land; it's worth a good deal more than you lent him."

"Just so. He owes everybody money round the Butte. I saw Taunton of the store and the implement man and told them Langside had to quit."

"You seem to have found them willing to agree."

Grant broke into a grim smile.

"What I say to those men goes. Then I've got security; they know I could pull Langside down."

George looked at Flora and was slightly surprised at her acquiescent manner.

"It sounds a little harsh; a good harvest might have set him straight," he said. "However, I suppose you have a reason for what you're doing."

"That's so. Langside's the kind of man I've no use for; he takes no interest in his place. After he has put in half a crop, he goes off and spends his time doing a little railroad work and slouching round the saloons along the line."

"It doesn't seem sufficient to justify your ruining him."

"I've got a little more against the man. Has it struck you that somebody round here, who knows the trails and the farmers' movements, is standing in with the liquor boys."

A light broke in upon George. Now that the matter had been put before him, he could recollect a number of points that seemed to prove the farmer right. When cattle had been killed, their owners had been absent; horses had disappeared at a time which prevented the discovery of their loss from being promptly made. It looked as if the offenses could only have been committed with the connivance of somebody in the neighborhood who had supplied their perpetrators with information.

"I believe you've got at the truth," he replied. "Still, it must be largely a matter of suspicion."

Grant leaned forward on the table and his face grew stern.

"You'll remember what Flett said about our system of justice sometimes breaking down. In this matter, I'm the jury, and I've thought the thing over for the

last six months, weighing up all that could be said for Langside, though it isn't much. What's more, I've talked to the man and watched him; giving him every chance. He has had his trial and he has to go; there's no appeal."

George could imagine the thoroughness with which his host had undertaken his task. Grant would be just, deciding nothing without the closest test. George felt that the man he meant to punish must be guilty. For all that, he looked at Flora.

"Have you been consulted?" he asked.

"I understood," said Flora. "And I agreed."

Her face was as hard as her father's and George was puzzled.

"I should have thought you would have been inclined to mercy."

Flora colored a little, but she looked at him steadily.

"Langside deserves the punishment he has so far escaped. He's guilty of what my father thinks, but there's another offense that I'm afraid will never be brought home to him."

George admired her courage as he remembered a very unpleasant story he had heard about a pretty waitress at the settlement. As a matter of fact, he had doubted it.

"Flora went to see the girl at Regina. They found her there pretty near dying," Grant explained quietly.

Recollecting a scene outside the Sachem, when Flora had accompanied Mrs. Nelson, George realized that he had rather overlooked one side of her character. She could face unpleasant things and strive to put them right, and she could be sternly just without shrinking when occasion demanded it. This, however, was not

an aspect of hers that struck one forcibly; he had generally seen her compassionate, cheerful, and considerate. Then he told himself that there was no reason why he should take any interest in Flora Grant's qualities.

"I suppose Langside will be sold up," he said.

"Open auction, though I guess there won't be much bidding. Folks round here don't know the man as I do, but they've good reason to believe the money will go to his creditors, and there'll be nothing left for him."

"The foreclosure won't meet with general favor," George said pointedly.

"That doesn't count. It strikes one as curious that people should be ready to sympathize with the slouch who lets his place go to ruin out of laziness, and never think of the storekeepers' just claim on the money he's wasted. Anyway, there's nothing to stop people from bidding; but, in case they hold off, we have fixed up how we'll divide the property."

It was obvious to George that the position of Grant's associates was unassailable. If any friends of Langside's attempted to run prices up, they would only put the money into his creditor's pockets; if, as seemed more probable, they discouraged the bidding, the creditors would secure his possessions at a low figure and recoup themselves by selling later at the proper value. George realized that Grant had carefully thought out his plans.

"I don't think you have left him any way of escape," he said.

"No," replied Grant; "we have got him tight. You

had better come along to the auction — you'll get notice of it — and see how the thing goes."

George said that he would do so, and shortly afterward drove away. On reaching home he told Edgar what he had heard, and the lad listened with a thoughtful expression.

"One can't doubt that Grant knows what he's doing, but I'm not sure he's wise," he said. "Though Langside's a regular slacker, he has a good many friends, and as a rule nobody has much sympathy with exacting creditors. Then it's bound to come out that it was Grant who set the other fellows after Langside; and if he buys up much of the property at a low figure, the thing will look suspicious."

"I tried to point that out."

"And found you had wasted words? Grant would see it before you did, and it wouldn't have the least effect on him. You wouldn't expect that man to yield to popular opinion. Still, the thing will make trouble, though I shall not be sorry if it forces on a crisis."

George nodded.

"I'm getting tired of these continual petty worries, and keeping a ceaseless lookout. I want to hit back."

"You'll no doubt get your chance. What about Miss Grant's attitude?"

"She agreed with her father completely; I was a little surprised."

"That was quite uncalled for," said Edgar with a smile. "It looks as if you didn't know the girl yet. These Westerners are a pretty grim people."

George frowned at this, though he felt that there was some truth in what his companion said. On the

whole, he was of the same mind as Grant; there were situations in which one must fearlessly take a drastic course.

"The sooner the trouble begins, the sooner it will be over," he said. "One has now and then to run the risk of getting hurt."

CHAPTER XXV

A COUNTERSTROKE

LANGSIDE'S farm was duly put up at auction, together with a valuable team which he hired out to his neighbors when he left the place, a few implements and a little rude furniture. The sale was held outside, and when George arrived upon the scene during the afternoon a row of light wagons and buggies stood behind the rickety shack, near which was an unsightly pile of broken crockery, discarded clothes and rusty provision cans. It was characteristic of Langside that he had not taken the trouble to carry them as far as the neighboring bluff. In front of the bluff, horses were picketed; along the side ran a strip of black soil, sprinkled with the fresh blades of wheat; and all round the rest of the wide circle the prairie stretched away under cloudless sunshine, flecked with brightest green.

A thin crowd surrounded the auctioneer's table, but the men stood in loose clusters, and George, walking through them, noticed that the undesirable element was largely represented. There were a number of small farmers, attracted by curiosity, or perhaps a wish to buy; but these kept to themselves, and men from the settlement of no fixed profession who worked spasmodically at different tasks, and spent the rest of their time in the Sachem, were more plentiful. Besides

these, there were some strangers, and George thought the appearance of several was far from prepossessing.

It was a glorious day. There was vigor in the warm breeze that swept the grassy waste; the sunshine that bathed the black loam where the green blades were springing up seemed filled with promise; but as the sale proceeded George became sensible of a vague compunction. The sight of the new wheat troubled him — Langside had laboriously sown that crop, which somebody else would reap. Watching the battered domestic utensils and furniture being carried out for sale had the same disturbing effect. Poor and comfortless as the shack was, it had, until rude hands had desecrated it, been a home. George felt that he was consenting to the ruin of a defenseless man, assisting to drive him forth, a wanderer and an outcast. He wondered how far the terrors of loneliness had urged Langside into his reckless courses — homesteaders scattered about the wide, empty spaces occasionally became insane — but with an effort he overcame the sense of pity.

Langside had slackly given way, and, choosing an evil part, had become a menace to the community; as Grant had said, he must go. This was unavoidable, and though the duty of getting rid of him was painful, it must be carried out. George was usually unsuspicious and of easy-going nature up to a certain point, but there was a vein of hardness in him.

Once or twice the auctioneer was interrupted by jeering cries, but he kept his temper and the sale went on, though George noticed that only a few strangers made any purchases. At length, when the small sundries had been cleared off, there was a curious silence

as the land was put up. It was evident that the majority of those present had been warned not to bid.

The auctioneer made a little speech in praise of the property, and paused when it fell flat; then, while George wondered what understanding the creditors had arrived at with Grant, a brown-faced stranger strode forward.

"I've been advised to let this place alone," he said. "I suppose you have a right to sell?"

"Yes, sir," replied the auctioneer. "Come along, and look at my authority, if you want. It's mortgaged property that has been foreclosed after the creditors had waited a long while for a settlement, and I may say that the interest demanded is under the present market rate. Everything's quite regular; no injustice has been done. If you're a purchaser, I'll take your bid."

"Then I'll raise you a hundred dollars," said the man.

There was a growl of dissatisfaction, and the stranger turned to the part of the crowd from which it proceeded.

"This is an open auction, boys. I was born in the next province, and I've seen a good many farms seized in the years when we have had harvest frost, but this is the first time I ever saw anybody try to interfere with a legal sale. Guess you may as well quit yapping, unless you mean to bid against me."

There was derisive laughter, and a loafer from Sage Butte threw a clod. Then another growl, more angry than the first, broke out as Grant, moving forward into a prominent place, nodded to the auctioneer. His

rugged face was impassive, and he ignored the crowd. A number of the farmers strolled toward him and stood near by with a resolute air which had its effect on the others, though George saw by Grant's look of surprise that he had not expected this. Another man made a bid, and the competition proceeded languidly, but except for a little mocking laughter and an occasional jeer, nobody interfered. In the end, the stranger bought the land; and soon afterward Grant walked up to George.

"I want the team, if I can get it at a reasonable figure; they're real good beasts with the imported Percheron strain strong in them," he said. "It will be a while before they're put up, and I'd be glad if you could ride round and let Flora know what's keeping me. I'd an idea she expected there might be some trouble to-day."

"I'll get off; but there's a mower yonder I would like. Will you buy it for me, if it goes at a fair price?"

"Certainly," promised Grant. "Tell Flora to give you supper; and if you ride back afterward by the trail, you'll meet me and I'll let you know about the mower."

George rode away shortly afterward, and Grant waited some time before he secured the team, after rather determined opposition. Finding nobody willing to lead the horses home, he hitched them to the back of his light wagon and set off at a leisurely pace. When he had gone a little distance, he overtook a man plodding along the trail. The fellow stopped when Grant came up.

"Will you give me a lift?" he asked.

The request is seldom refused on the prairie, and Grant pulled up his team.

"Get in," he said. "Where are you going?"

"North," answered the other, as he clambered up. "Looking for a job; left the railroad yesterday and spent the night in a patch of scrub. Heard there was stock in the bluff country; that's my line."

Grant glanced at the fellow sharply as he got into the wagon and noticed nothing in his disfavor. His laconic account of himself was borne out by his appearance.

"It's quite a way to the first homestead, if you're making for the big bluffs," he said. "You had better come along with me and go on in the morning."

"I'll be glad," responded the other. "These nights are pretty cold, and my blanket's thin."

They drove on, and after a while the stranger glanced at the team hitched behind the vehicle.

"Pretty good beasts," he remarked. "That mare's a daisy. Ought to be worth a pile."

"She cost it," Grant told him. "I've just bought her at a sale."

"I heard the boys talking about it when I was geting dinner at the settlement," said the stranger carelessly. "Called the fellow whose place was sold up Langside, I think. There's nothing much wrong with the team you're driving."

Grant nodded; they were valuable animals, for he was fond of good horses. He was well satisfied with his new purchases and knew that Langside had bought the mare after a profitable haulage contract during the building of a new railroad. His companion's flattering opinion made him feel rather amiable toward him.

It was getting near dusk when they entered a strip of broken country, where the ground was sandy and lolled in low ridges and steep hillocks. Here and there small pines on the higher summits stood out black against the glaring crimson light; birches and poplars straggled up some of the slopes; and the trail, which wound through the hollows, was loose and heavy. The moist sand clogged the wheels and the team plodded through it laboriously, until they came to a spot where the melted snow running into a depression had formed a shallow lake. This had dried up, but the soil was very soft and marshy. Grant pulled up and glanced dubiously at the deep ruts cut in the road.

"There's a way round through the sand and scrub, but it's mighty rough and I'm not sure we could get through it in the dark," he said.

"S'pose you double-yoke and drive straight ahead," suggested the other. "I see you have some harness in the wagon."

Grant considered. The harness, which had been thrown in with his purchase, was old and short of one or two pieces; it would take time and some contriving to hitch on the second team, and the light was failing rapidly. When he had crossed the soft place, there would still be some rough ground to traverse before he reached the smoother trail by which George would be riding.

"It might be as quick to go round," he replied.

"No, sir," said his companion, firmly. "There's a blamed steep bit up the big sandhill."

Suspicion flashed on Grant; the man had led him to believe he was a stranger to the locality, and it was

significant that he should insist upon their stopping and harnessing the second team.

"That's so," he returned. "Guess you had better get down and see if it's very soft ahead."

The fellow rose with a promptness which partly disarmed Grant's suspicions, and put his foot on the edge of the vehicle, ready to jump down. Then he turned swiftly and flung himself upon the farmer, crushing his soft felt hat down to his chin. Grant could see nothing, and while he strove to get a grip on his antagonist he was thrown violently backward off the driving seat. The wagon was of the usual high pattern, and he came down on the ground with a crash that nearly knocked him unconscious. Before he got up, he was seized firmly and held with his shoulders pressed against the soil. He struggled, however, until somebody grasped his legs and his arms were drawn forcibly apart. It was impossible to see, because the thick hat was still over his face and somebody held it fast, but he had an idea that three or four men had fallen upon him. They had, no doubt, been hidden among the brush; the affair had been carefully arranged with his treacherous companion.

"Open his jacket; try the inside pocket," cried one; and he felt hands fumbling about him. Then there was a disappointed exclamation. "Check-book; that's no good!"

The farmer made a last determined effort. After having long ruled his household and hired men as a benevolent but decidedly firm-handed autocrat, it was singularly galling to be treated in this unceremonious fashion, and if he could only shake off the hat and get

a glimpse of his assailants he would know them again. Moreover, he had brought a roll of bills with him, in case he should make some small purchases. He was, however, held firmly, and the hands he had felt dived into another pocket.

"Got it now!" cried a hoarse voice. "Here's his wallet; seems to have a good wad in it!"

Grant, though he was generally sternly collected, boiled with fury. He felt no fear, but an uncontrollable longing to grapple with the men who had so humiliated him.

"Guess, I'll fix you up!" came an angry voice when Grant managed to fling off one pair of hands.

Then he received a heavy blow on the head. Somebody had struck him with the butt of a whip or riding quirt. The pain was distressing; he felt dazed and stupid, disinclined to move, but he retained consciousness. There were sounds to which he could attach a meaning: a rattle of harness which indicated that his driving team was being loosened, a thud of hoofs as the heavier Percherons were led away. In the meanwhile he could still feel a strong grasp on his shoulder, holding him down, and once or twice a man near him gave the others sharp instructions. Grant made a languid effort to fix the voice in his memory, but this was difficult because his mind worked heavily.

At length the driving team was unyoked — he could hear it being led away — but the ache in his head grew almost intolerable and his lassitude more intense. For a while he had no idea what was going on; and then a hoarse cry, which seemed one of alarm, rang out sharply. There was a patter of running feet, a thud of hoofs on the soft soil, and, breaking

through these sounds, a rhythmic staccato drumming. Somebody was riding hard across the uneven ground.

Gathering his languid senses, Grant suddenly moved his head, flinging the hat from his face, and raised himself a little, leaning on one elbow. There was no longer anybody near him, but he could see a man riding past a shadowy clump of trees a little distance off, leading a second horse. Closer at hand, another man was running hard beside one of the Percherons, and while Grant watched him he made an effort to scramble up on the back of the unsaddled animal, but slipped off. Both these men were indistinct in the dim hollow, but on a sandy ridge above, which still caught the fading light, there was a sharply-outlined mounted figure sweeping across the broken ground at a reckless gallop. It must be Lansing, who had come to the rescue. Grant sent up a faint, hoarse cry of exultation. He forgot his pain and dizziness, he even forgot he had been assaulted; he was conscious only of a burning wish to see Lansing ride down the fellow who was running beside the Percheron.

There was a patch of thick scrub not far ahead which it would be difficult for the horseman on the rise to break through, and if the fugitive could succeed in mounting, he might escape while his pursuer rode round; but Lansing seemed to recognize this. He swept down from the ridge furiously and rode to cut off the thief. Grant saw him come up with the fellow, with his quirt swung high, but the figures of men and horses were now indistinct against the shrub. There was a blow struck; one of the animals reared, plunged and fell; the other went on and vanished into the gloom of the dwarf trees.

Then Grant, without remembering how he got up, found himself upon his feet and lurching unsteadily toward the clump of brush. When he reached it, Lansing was standing beside his trembling horse, which had a long red gash down its shoulder. His hands were stained and a big discolored knife lay near his feet. There was nobody else about, but a beat of hoofs came back, growing fainter, out of the gathering dusk.

George looked around when the farmer joined him, and then pointed to the wound on the horse.

"I think it was meant for my leg," he said. "I hit the fellow once with the thick end of the quirt, but he jumped straight at me. The horse reared when he felt the knife and I came off before he fell. When I got up again, the fellow had gone."

Grant felt scarcely capable of standing. He sat down heavily and fumbled for his pipe, while George turned his attention to the horse again.

"Though it's only in the muscle, the cut looks deep," he said at length. "I'd better lead him back to your place; it's nearer than mine."

"I'd rather you came along; I'm a bit shaky."

"Of course," said George. "I was forgetting. Those fellows had you down. Are you hurt?"

"They knocked me out with something heavy — my whip, I guess — but I'm getting over it. Cleaned out my pockets; went off with both teams."

George nodded.

"It's pretty bad; quite impossible to get after them. They'll head for Montana as fast as they can ride."

"Did you see any of them clearly?"

"One fellow looked like Langside, though I

couldn't swear to him; but I'd know the man who knifed my horse. Remembered that would be desirable, in case he escaped me; and I got a good look at him. Now, if you feel able shall we make a start? I'm afraid the horse is too lame to carry you."

He picked up the knife, Grant rose, and they set off, leading the horse, which moved slowly and painfully. It had grown dark and the trail was rough, but the farmer plodded homeward, stopping a few moments now and then. The path, however, grew smoother when they had left the sandy ridges behind, and by and by the lights of the homestead commenced to twinkle on the vast shadowy plain. Soon after they reached it, George rode away, mounted on a fresh horse, in search of Constable Flett.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE CLIMAX

GEORGE was tired and sleepy when he reached the settlement early in the morning, and found Flett at Hardie's house. It transpired from their conversation that there had been a disturbance at the Sachem on the return of a party which had driven out to the sale, and one man, who accused a companion of depriving him of a bargain, had attacked and badly injured him with a decanter. Flett, being sent for, had arrested the fellow, and afterward called upon the clergyman for information about his antecedents and character. He listened with close attention while George told his tale; and then examined the knife he produced.

"This is about the limit!" he exclaimed. "You wouldn't have persuaded me that the thing was possible when I was first sent into the district. It isn't what one expects in the wheat-belt, and it certainly has to be stopped."

"Of course," said George, with some impatience. "But wouldn't it be wiser to consider the ways and means? At present the fellows are no doubt pushing on for the frontier with two valuable teams and a wad of stolen bills."

Flett smiled at him indulgently.

"This isn't a job that can be put through in a hurry.

If they're heading for the boundary — and I guess they are — they'll be in Dakota or Montana long before any of the boys I'll wire to could come up with them. Our authority doesn't hold on American soil."

"Is that to be the end of it?"

"Why, no," Flett answered dryly. "As I guess you have heard, they have had trouble of this kind in Alberta for a while; and most every time the boys were able to send back any American mavericks and beef-cattle that were run into Canada. As the result of it, our chiefs at Regina are pretty good friends with the sheriffs and deputies on the other side. They're generally willing to help us where they can."

"Then you shouldn't have much difficulty in trailing your men. Suppose a fellow turned up with four exceptionally good horses and offered them to an American farmer or dealer, wouldn't it arouse suspicion?"

"It might," said Flett, with a meaning smile. "But the thing's not so simple as it looks. We all know that Canadian steers and horses have been run off and disposed of across the frontier; and now and then a few from that side have disappeared in Canada. This points to there being a way of getting rid of them; some mean white on a lonely holding will take them at half-value, and pass them along. What we have to do is to send a man over quietly to investigate, and get the sheriffs and deputies to keep their eyes open. I'm going to beg the Regina people to let me be that man."

"You may as well understand that it isn't the return of the horses Grant wants so much as the conviction of the men who waylaid him."

"Then," said Flett, pointedly, "he must be mighty mad."

Hardie joined in George's laugh; but the constable went on:

"I believe we're going to get them; but it will take time — all summer, perhaps. I've known our boys lay hands on a man they wanted, eighteen months afterward."

"In one way, I don't think that's much to their credit," the clergyman remarked.

Taking up the knife George had handed him, Flett pointed to some initials scratched on the bone haft.

"Kind of foolish thing for the fellow to put his name on his tools; but I don't know anybody those letters might stand for. Now you describe him as clearly as you can, while I put it down."

George did as he was bidden, and added: "There were two more — one of them looked like Langside — and I believe a fourth man, though I may be mistaken in this. They were moving about pretty rapidly and the light was bad."

Flett got up.

"I'll have word sent along to Regina, and then try to locate their trail until instructions come. I want to get about it right away, but there's this blamed fellow who knocked out his partner at the Sachem, and it will take me most of a day's ride before I can hand him on to Davies. It's a charge that nobody's going to worry about, and it's a pity he couldn't have escaped. Still, that's the kind of thing that can't happen too often."

He went out and George turned to Hardie.

"How does the matter strike you?"

"I've an idea that Flett was right in saying it was the limit. There was a certain romance about these disturbances when they began; they were a novelty in this part of Canada. People took them lightly, glad of something amusing or exciting to talk about. It was through popular indifference that the gang first gained a footing, but by degrees it became evident that they couldn't be dislodged without a vigorous effort. People shrank from making it; and, with Beamish backing them, the fellows got steadily bolder and better organized. All the time, however, they were really at the mercy of the general body of orderly citizens. Now they have gone too far; this last affair can't be tolerated. Instead of apathy, there'll be an outbreak of indignation; and I expect the people who might have stopped the thing at the beginning will denounce the police."

George nodded.

"That's my idea. What's our part?"

"I think it's to assist in the reaction. Your story's a striking one. We had better get it into a newspaper as soon as possible. I suppose it would be correct to say that Grant was cruelly beaten?"

"His face is blue from jaw to temple. They knocked him nearly senseless with the butt of a whip, while he was lying, helpless, on the ground."

"And your horse was badly wounded?"

"I wish it weren't true; there's a gash about eight inches long. If it will assist the cause, you can say the stab was meant for me."

"Well," said Hardie, "I think it will make a moving tale. I'm afraid, however, I'll have to lay some stress upon the single-handed rescue."

George looked dubious.

"I'd rather you left that out."

"We must impress the matter on people's thoughts, make it command attention; a little diplomacy is allowable now and then," said Hardie, smiling. "Since you don't mind getting yourself into trouble, I don't see why you should object to being held up to admiration, and it's in an excellent cause. Now, however, I'll order breakfast for you, and then you had better get some sleep."

During the afternoon, George set off for home, and he was plowing for the summer fallow a week later when Flora Grant rode up to him.

"I suppose you have got your mail and have seen what the *Sentinel* says about you?" she asked mischievously.

George looked uncomfortable, but he laughed.

"Yes," he confessed. "It seemed to afford Edgar some amusement."

"Who's responsible for that flattering column? It doesn't read like the work of the regular staff."

"I'm afraid that I am, to some extent, though Hardie's the actual culprit. The fact is, he thought the course was necessary."

"Well, I suspected something of the kind; so did my father. It was a wise move, and I think it will have its effect."

George made no comment and she sat silent a moment or two while he watched her with appreciation. She was well-mounted on a beautiful, carefully-

groomed horse; the simple skirt and bodice of pale gray emphasized the pure tinting of her face and hands and the warm glow of her hair, in which the fierce sunshine forced up strong coppery gleams. Her lips formed a patch of crimson, there was a red band on her wide Stetson hat, and her eyes shone a deep blue as she looked down at George, who stood in the sandy furrow leaning against the heavy plow. He was dressed in old overalls that had faded with dust and sun to the indefinite color of the soil, but they displayed the fine lines of a firmly knit and muscular figure. His face was deeply bronzed, but a glow of sanguine red shone through its duskier coloring. Behind them both ran a broad sweep of stubble, steeped in strong ochre, relieved by brighter lemon hues where the light blazed on it.

"Though I couldn't resist the temptation to tease you, I quite agree with the *Sentinel,*" she resumed. "It really was a very gallant rescue, and I suppose you know I recognize my debt to you. I was a little too startled to speak about it when you brought my father home, and you went away so fast."

"The fellows were afraid of being identified; they bolted as soon as they saw me."

"One didn't," Flora pointed out. "A knife-thrust, like the one you avoided, or a pistol-shot would have obviated any risk they ran. But of course you hate to be thanked."

"No," George replied impulsively; "not by you."

"I wonder," she said with an amused air, "why you should make an exception of me?"

"I suppose it lessens my sense of obligation. I feel I've done some little thing to pay you back."

"I'm not sure that was very happily expressed. Is it painful to feel that you owe anything to your neighbors?"

George flushed.

"That wasn't what I meant. Do you think it's quite fair to lay traps for me, when you can count on my falling into them?" He turned and pointed to the great stretch of grain that clothed the soil with vivid green. "Look at your work. Last fall, all that plowing was strewn with a wrecked and mangled crop; now it's sown with wheat that will stand the drought. I was feeling nearly desperate, wondering how I was to master the sandy waste, when you came to the rescue and my troubles melted like the dust in summer rain. They couldn't stand before you; you banished them."

She looked at him rather curiously, and, George thought, with some cause, for he was a little astonished at his outbreak. This was not the kind of language that was most natural to him.

"I wonder," she said, "why you should take so much for granted — I mean in holding me accountable?"

"It's obvious," George declared. "I understand your father; he's a very generous friend, but the idea of sending me the seed didn't occur to him in the first place; though I haven't the least doubt that he was glad to act on it."

"Ah!" said Flora, "it looks as if you had been acquiring some penetration; you were not so explicit the last time you insisted on thanking me. Who can have been teaching you? It seems, however, that I'm still incomprehensible."

George considered. It would be undesirable to explain that his enlightenment had come from Edgar, and he wanted to express what he felt.

"No," he said, in answer to her last remark; "not altogether; but I've sometimes felt that there's a barrier of reserve in you, beyond which it's hard to get."

"Do you think it would be worth while to make the attempt? Suppose you succeeded and found there was nothing on the other side?"

He made a sign of negation, and she watched him with some interest; the man was trying to thrash out his ideas.

"That couldn't happen," he declared gravely. "Somehow you make one feel there is much in you that wants discovery, but that one will learn it by and by. After all, it's only the shallow people you never really get to know."

"It would seem an easy task, on the face of it."

"As a matter of fact, it isn't. They have a way of enveloping themselves in an air of importance and mystery, and when they don't do so, they're casual and inconsequent. One likes people with, so to speak, some continuity of character. By degrees one gets to know how they'll act and it gives one a sense of reliance." He paused and added, diffidently: "Anything you did would be wise and generous."

"By degrees?" smiled Flora. "So it's slowly, by patient sapping, the barriers go down! One could imagine that such things might be violently stormed. But you're not rash, are you, or often in a hurry? However, it's time I was getting home."

She waved her hand and rode away, and George, getting into the saddle, started his team, and thought

about her while he listened to the crackling of the stubble going down beneath the hoofs, and the soft thud of thrown-back soil as the lengthening rows of clods broke away from the gleaming shares. What she might have meant by her last remark he could not tell, though so far as it concerned him, he was ready to admit that he was addicted to steady plodding. Then his thoughts took a wider range, and he began to make comparisons. Flora was not characterized by Sylvia's fastidious refinement; she was more virile and yet more reposeful. Sylvia's activities spread bustle around her; she required much assistance and everybody in her neighborhood was usually impressed into her service, though their combined efforts often led to nothing. Flora's work was done silently; the results were most apparent.

Still, the charm Sylvia exerted was always obvious; a thing to rejoice in and be thankful for. Flora had not the same effect on one, though he suspected there was a depth of tenderness in her, behind the barrier. It struck him as a pity that she showed no signs of interest in West, who of late seemed to have been attracted by the pretty daughter of a storekeeper at the settlement; but, after all, the lad was hardly old or serious enough for Flora. There was, however, nobody else in the district who was nearly good enough for her; and George felt glad that she was reserved and critical. It would be disagreeable to contemplate her yielding to any suitor unless he were a man of exceptional merit.

Then he laughed and called to his horses. He was thinking about matters that did not concern him; his work was to drive the long furrow for Sylvia's benefit,

and he found pleasure in it. Bright sunshine smote the burnished clods; scattered, white-edged clouds drove across the sky of dazzling blue, flinging down cool gray shadows that sped athwart the stubble; young wheat, wavy lines of bluff, and wide-spread prairie were steeped in glowing color. The man rejoiced in the rush of the breeze; the play of straining muscles swelling and sinking on the bodies of the team before him was pleasant to watch; he felt at home in the sun and wind, which, tempered as they often were by gentle rain, were staunchly assisting him. By and by, all the foreground of the picture he gazed upon would be covered with the coppery ears of wheat. He had once shrunk from returning to Canada; but now, through all the stress of cold and heat, he was growing fond of the new land. What was more, he felt the power to work at such a task as he was now engaged in to be a privilege.

CHAPTER XXVII

A SIGN FROM FLETT

SUMMER drew on with swift strides. Crimson flowers flecked the prairie grass, the wild barley waved its bristling ears along the trails, saskatoons glowed red in the shadows of each bluff. Day by day swift-moving clouds cast flitting shadows across the sun-scorched plain, but though they shed no moisture the wheat stood nearly waist-high upon the Marston farm. The sand that whirled about it did the strong stalks no harm.

Earlier in the season there had been drenching thunder showers, and beyond the grain the flax spread in sheets of delicate blue that broke off on the verge of the brown-headed timothy. Still farther back lay the green of alsike and alfalfa, for the band of red and white cattle that roamed about the bluffs; but while the fodder crop was bountiful George had decided to supplement it with the natural prairie hay. There was no pause in his exertions; task followed task in swift succession. Rising in the sharp cold of the dawn, he toiled assiduously until the sunset splendors died out in paling green and crimson on the far rim of the plain.

The early summer was marked by signs of approaching change in Sage Butte affairs. There were

still a few disturbances and Hardie had troubles to face, but he and his supporters noticed that the indifference with which they had been regarded was giving place to sympathy. When Grant first visited the settlement after his misadventure, he was received with expressions of indignant commiseration, and he afterward told Flora dryly that he was astonished at the number of his friends. Mrs. Nelson and a few of the stalwarts pressed Hardie to make new and more vigorous efforts toward the expulsion of the offenders, but the clergyman refrained. Things were going as he wished; it was scarcely wise to expose such a tender thing as half-formed opinion to a severe test, and the failure that might follow a premature attempt could hardly be recovered from. It seemed better to wait until Grant's assailants should be arrested, and the story of their doings elicited in court, to rouse general indignation, and he thought this would happen. Flett had disappeared some weeks ago and nothing had been heard of him, but Hardie believed his chiefs had sent him out on the robbers' trail. The constable combined sound sense with dogged pertinacity, and these were serviceable qualities.

It was a hot afternoon when George brought home his last load of wild sloo hay, walking beside his team, while Flora curbed her reckless horse a few yards off. She had ridden over with her father, and finding that George had not returned, had gone on to prevent a hired man from being sent for him. They had met each other frequently of late, and George was sensible of an increasing pleasure in the girl's society; though what Flora felt did not appear. Behind them the jolting wagon strained beneath its high-piled load that

diffused an odor of peppermint; in front the shadow of a bluff lay cool upon the sun-scorched prairie.

"I suppose you heard that Baxter lost a steer last week," she said. "Most likely, it was killed; but, though the police searched the reservation, there was no trace of the hide. We have had a little quietness, but I'm not convinced that our troubles won't break out again. Nobody seems to have heard anything of Flett."

"He's no doubt busy somewhere."

"I'm inclined to believe so, and, in a way, his silence is reassuring. Flett can work without making a disturbance, and that is in his favor. But what has become of Mr. West? We haven't seen much of him of late."

"He has fallen into a habit of riding over to the settlement in his spare time, which isn't plentiful."

"Ah!" exclaimed Flora; "that agrees with some suspicions of mine. Don't you feel a certain amount of responsibility?"

"I do," George admitted. "Still, he's rather headstrong, and he hasn't told me why he goes to the Butte; though the girl's father gave me a hint. I like Taunton — he's perfectly straightforward — and I'd almost made up my mind to ask your opinion about the matter, but I was diffident."

"I'll give it to you without reserve — there's no ground for uneasiness on West's account; he might fall into much worse hands. If Helen Taunton has any influence over him, it will be wisely used. Besides, she has been well educated; she spent a few years in Montreal."

"She has a nice face; in fact, she's decidedly pretty."

"And that would cover a multitude of shortcomings?"

"Well," said George, thoughtfully, "mere physical beauty is something to be thankful for; though I'm not sure that beauty can be, so to speak, altogether physical. When I said the girl had a nice face, I meant that its expression suggested a wholesome character."

"You seem to have been cultivating your powers of observation," Flora told him. "But I'm more disposed to consider the matter from Helen's point of view. As it happens, she's a friend of mine and I've reasons for believing that your partner's readily susceptible and inclined to be fickle. Of course, I'm not jealous."

George laughed.

"He's too venturesome now and then, but he has been a little spoiled. I've an idea that this affair is likely to be permanent. He has shown a keen interest in the price of land and the finances of farming, which struck me as having its meaning."

They had now nearly reached the bluff and a horseman in khaki uniform rode out of it to meet them.

"I've been over to your place," he said to George, when he had dismounted. "I was sent to show you a photograph and ask if you can recognize anybody in it?"

He untied a packet and George studied the picture handed him. It showed the rutted main street of a little western town, with the sunlight on a row of wooden buildings. In the distance a band of cattle

were being driven forward by two mounted men; nearer at hand a few wagons stood outside a livery stable; and in the foreground three or four figures occupied the veranda of a frame hotel. The ease of their attitudes suggested that they did not know they were being photographed, and their faces were distinct. George looked triumphantly excited and unhesitatingly laid a finger on one face.

"This is the man that drove off Mr. Grant's Percheron and stabbed my horse."

The trooper produced a thin piece of card and a small reading-glass.

"Take another look through this; it came along with the photograph. Now, would you be willing to swear to him?"

"I'll be glad to do so, if I have the chance. Shall I put a mark against the fellow?"

"Not on that!" The trooper handed George the card, which proved to be a carefully drawn key-plan of the photograph, with the figures outlined. "You can mark this one."

George did as he was told, and then handed the photograph to Flora.

"How did your people get it?" he asked the trooper.

"I can't say; they don't go into explanations."

"But what do you think? Did Flett take the photograph?"

"No, sir; I heard him tell the sergeant he knew nothing about a camera. He may have got somebody to take it or may have bought the thing."

"Do you know where he is?"

"I only know he got special orders after Mr.

Grant was robbed. It's my idea he was somewhere around when the photograph was taken."

"I wonder where it was taken? In Alberta, perhaps, though I'm inclined to think it was on the other side of the frontier."

"That is my opinion," said Flora. "There's not a great difference between us and our neighbors, but the dress of the mounted men and the style of the stores are somehow American. I'd say Montana, or perhaps Dakota."

"Montana," said the trooper. "The big bunch of cattle seems to fix it."

"Then you think Flett is over there?" asked George. "I'm interested, so is Miss Grant, and you needn't be afraid of either of us spreading what you say."

"It's my notion that Flett has spotted his men, but I guess he's now watching out near the boundary in Canada. These rustler fellows can't do all their business on one side; they'll have to cross now and then. Flett's in touch with some of the American sheriffs, who'll give him the tip, and the first time the fellows slip over the frontier he'll get them. That would suit everybody better and save a blamed lot of formalities."

Flora nodded.

"It strikes me as very likely; and Flett's perhaps the best man you could have sent. But have you shown the photograph to my father?"

"I did that before I left the homestead. There's nobody in the picture like the fellow who drove with Mr. Grant, and he tells me he saw nobody else. Now I must be getting on."

He rode away, and Flora reverted to the topic she and George had been discussing.

"So you believe Mr. West is thinking of living here altogether! I suppose he would be able to take a farm of moderate size?"

"It wouldn't be very large; he can't have much money, but his people would help him to make a start if they were satisfied. That means they would consult me."

Flora smiled.

"And you feel you would be in a difficult position, if you were asked whether it would be wise to let him marry a prairie girl? Have you formed any decision about the matter?"

She spoke in an indifferent tone, but George imagined that she was interested.

"I can't see why he shouldn't do so."

"Think a little. West has been what you call well brought up, he's fastidious, and I haven't found English people free from social prejudices. Could you, as his friend, contemplate his marrying the daughter of a storekeeper in a rather primitive western town? Taunton, of course, is not a polished man."

"I don't think that counts; he's a very good type in spite of it. The girl's pretty, she has excellent manners, and she strikes me as having sense — and in some respects Edgar has very little. I'll admit that at one time I might not have approved of the idea, but I believe I've got rid of one or two foolish opinions that I brought out with me. If Miss Taunton is what she appears to be, he's lucky in getting her. Don't you think so?"

He had spoken with a little warmth, though, as

Flora knew, he was seldom emphatic; and a rather curious expression crept into her face. He did not quite understand it, but he thought she was pleased for some reason or other!

"Oh," she said lightly, "I have told you my opinion."

Nothing further was said about the subject, but George walked beside his team in a state of calm content. His companion was unusually gracious; she made a picture that was pleasant to watch as she sat, finely poised, on the big horse, with the strong sunlight on her face. Her voice was attractive, too; it reached him, clear and musical, through the thud of hoofs and the creak of slowly-turning wheels, for he made no attempt to hurry his team.

When they reached the homestead, the conversation centered on the constable's visit; and when the Grants left, Edgar stood outside with George, watching the slender mounted figure grow smaller beside the jolting buggy.

"George," he said, "I've met very few girls who could compare with Flora Grant, taking her all round."

"That's correct," George told him. "As a matter of fact, I'm doubtful whether you have met any who would bear the comparison. It was the sillier ones who made a fuss over you."

"I know of one," Edgar resumed. "As it happens, she's in Canada."

"I'd a suspicion of something of the kind," George said dryly.

Edgar made no answer, but presently he changed the subject.

"What's the least one could take up a farm here with, and have a fair chance of success?"

"One understands it has been done with practically nothing on preëmpted land, though I'm rather dubious. In your case, I'd fix five thousand dollars as the minimum; more would be decidedly better."

"Yes," said Edgar thoughtfully; "that's about my idea; and I suppose it could be raised, though my share of what was left us has nearly all been spent in cramming me with knowledge I've no great use for. Stephen, however, has done pretty well, and I think he always realized that it would be his privilege to give me a lift; I've no doubt he'll write to you as soon as I mention the matter, and your answer will have its effect." He looked at George with anxious eyes. "I venture to think you'll strain a point to say what you can in my favor?"

"In the first place, I'll ride over to the Butte and have supper with Taunton, as soon as I can find the time."

"Thanks," responded Edgar gratefully; "you won't have any doubts after that." Then he broke into laughter. "You'll excuse me, but it's really funny, George."

"I don't see the joke," George said shortly.

Edgar tried to look serious, and failed.

"I can imagine your trying to weigh up Helen; starting a subtle conversation to elucidate her character, and showing what you were after and your profound ignorance with every word; though you mustn't suppose I'd be afraid of submitting her to the severest test. Why, you wouldn't even know when a girl was in love with you, unless she told you so. Perhaps it's

some excuse that your mind's fixed on one woman to the exclusion of all the rest, though one could imagine that, as you think of her, she's as unreal and as far removed from anything made of flesh and blood as a saint in a picture. After all, I dare say it's a very proper feeling."

George left him, half amused and half disturbed. He did not resent Edgar's freedom of speech, but the latter had a way of mixing hints that were not altogether foolish with his badinage, and his comrade was inclined to wonder what he had meant by one suggestive remark. It troubled him as he strolled along the edge of the tall green wheat, but he comforted himself with the thought that, after all, Edgar's conversation was often unworthy of serious consideration.

A week later George rode over to the store at the settlement, feeling a little diffident, because he had undertaken the visit only from a sense of duty. He was cordially received, and was presently taken in to supper, which was served in a pretty room and presided over by a very attractive girl. She had a pleasant voice and a quiet face; though he thought she must have guessed his errand, she treated him with a composure that set him at his ease. Indeed, she was by no means the kind of girl he had expected Edgar to choose; but this was in her favor. George could find no fault in her.

Shortly after the meal was finished his host was called away, and the girl looked up at George with a flush of color creeping, most becomingly, into her face.

"Edgar told me I needn't be afraid of you," she said.

George smiled.

"I can understand his confidence, though it had a better foundation than my good-nature. I wonder whether I might venture to say that he has shown remarkably good sense?"

"I'm glad you don't think he has been very foolish," replied the girl, and it was obvious to George that she understood the situation.

He made her a little grave bow.

"What I've said, I'm ready to stick to. I'm a friend of Edgar's, and that carried an obligation."

"Yes," she assented, "but it was because you are a friend of his and, in a way, represent his people in England, that I was a little uneasy."

Her speech implied a good deal and George admired her candor.

"Well," he said, "so far as I am concerned, you must never feel anything of the kind again. But I think you should have known it was quite unnecessary."

She gave him a grateful glance and soon afterward her father came in.

"Guess we'll take a smoke in the back office," he said to George.

George followed him, and thought he understood why he was led into the little untidy room strewn with packets of goods, though his host had a fine commodious house. Taunton would not attempt to dissociate himself from his profession; he meant to be taken for what he was, but he knew his value. He was a gaunt, elderly man: as far as his general appearance went, a typical inhabitant of a remote and half-developed western town, though there was a hint

of authority in his face. Giving George an excellent cigar, he pointed to a chair.

"Now," he began, "we must have a talk. When your partner first came hanging round my store, buying things he didn't want, I was kind of short with him. Helen helps me now and then with the books, and he seemed to know when she came in."

"I noticed he came home in a rather bad temper once or twice," George said with a laugh. "I used to wonder, when he produced sardine cans at supper, but after a while I began to understand."

"Well," continued Taunton, "I didn't intend to have any blamed Percy trying to turn my girl's head, until I knew what he meant. I'd nobody to talk it over with — I lost her mother long ago — so I kind of froze him out, until one day he came dawdling in and asked if he might take Helen to Jim Haxton's dance.

"'Does she know you have come to me about it?' I said.

"'Can't say,' he told me coolly, with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. 'I haven't mentioned the matter yet; I thought I'd ask you first.'

"'S'pose I object?' I said.

"'Then,' he allowed quite tranquil, 'the thing will have to be considered. There's not the slightest reason why you should object.'

"I'd a notion I could agree with him — I liked the way he talked — and I told him Helen could go, but the next time he called he was to walk right into the office instead of hanging round the counter. I asked him what he'd done with all the canned truck he'd bought, and he said he was inclined to think his part-

ner had eaten most of it. Since then he's been over pretty often, and I figured it was time I gave you a hint."

"Thanks," responded George. "He was, in a way, placed in my hands, but I've no real control over him."

"That's so; he's of age. What I felt was this — I've nothing against West, but my girl's good enough for anybody, and I can't have his people in England looking down on her and making trouble. If they're not satisfied, they had better call him back right now. There's to be no high-toned condescension in this matter."

"I don't think you need be afraid of that," said George. "It would be altogether uncalled for. It's very likely that I shall be consulted, and I'll have pleasure in telling his people that I consider him a lucky man."

"There's another point — has West any means?"

"I believe about five thousand dollars could be raised to put him on a farm."

Taunton nodded.

"It's not very much, but I don't know that I'm sorry. I'll see they're fixed right; whatever West gets I'll beat. My girl shan't be indebted to her husband's folks. But there's not a word to be said about this yet. West must wait another year before we decide on anything."

George thought the storekeeper's attitude could not be found fault with, and when he drove home through the soft dusk of the summer night, he was glad to feel that there was no need for anxiety about the choice Edgar had made.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE LEADING WITNESS

THREE or four weeks passed quietly without any news from Flett until one evening when Edgar sat talking to Miss Taunton in the office of her father's store at Sage Butte. The little, dusty room was unpleasantly hot and filled with the smell of resinous pine boards; there was a drawl of voices and an occasional patter of footsteps outside the door; and a big book, which seemed to have no claim on her attention, lay open on the table in front of the girl.

She was listening to Edgar with a smile in her eyes, and looking, so he thought, remarkably attractive in her light summer dress which left her pretty, round arms uncovered to the elbow and displayed the polished whiteness of her neck. He was expressing his approval of the current fashions, which he said were rational and particularly becoming to people with skins like ivory. Indeed, he was so engrossed in his subject that he did not hear footsteps approaching until his companion flashed a warning glance at him; and he swung round with some annoyance as the door opened.

"I guessed I would find you here," said the station-agent, looking in with an indulgent smile.

"You're a thoughtful man," retorted Edgar. "You may as well tell me what you want."

"I've a wire from Flett, sent at Hatfield, down the line."

"What can he be doing there?" Edgar exclaimed; and Miss Taunton showed her interest.

"He was coming through on the train. Wanted Mr. Lansing to meet him at the station, if he was in town. Hadn't you better go along?"

"I suppose so," said Edgar resignedly, glancing at his watch. "It looks as if your men had taken their time. Flett should be here in about a quarter of an hour now."

"Operator had train orders to get through; we have two freights side-tracked," the agent explained. "Don't be late; she's coming along on time."

He hurried out, and a few minutes later Edgar crossed the street and strolled along the low wooden platform, upon which a smart constable was waiting. A long trail of smoke, drawing rapidly nearer, streaked the gray and ochre of the level plain, and presently the big engine and dusty cars rolled into the station amid the hoarse tolling of the bell. As they ran slowly past him, Edgar saw a police trooper leaning out from a vestibule, and when the train stopped the constable on the platform hurried toward the car. A hum of excited voices broke out and Edgar had some difficulty in pushing through the growing crowd to reach the steps. A constable, who had hard work to keep the others back, let him pass, and he found Flett standing on the platform above, looking rather jaded, with a pistol loose in his holster.

"Isn't Mr. Lansing here?" Flett asked eagerly, and then turned to the trooper. "Keep those fellows off!"

"No," answered Edgar; "he hasn't come into town. But what's the cause of this commotion? Have you got your men?"

"Three of them," said Flett, with a look of pride. "I expect we'll get the fourth. But come in a minute, out of the noise."

The car was besieged. Curious men were clambering up the side of it, trying to peer in through the windows; others disputed angrily with the trooper who drove them off the steps. Eager questions were shouted and scraps of random information given, and groups of people were excitedly running across the street to the station. It was, however, a little quieter in the vestibule when Flett had banged the door. He next opened the inner door that led to the smoking compartment of the Colonist car. In spite of its roominess, it was almost insufferably hot and very dirty; the sunlight struck in through the windows; sand and fine cinders lay thick upon the floor. A pile of old blue blankets lay, neatly folded, on one of the wooden seats, and on those adjoining sat three men. Two wore brown duck overalls, gray shirts, and big soft hats; one was dressed in threadbare cloth; but there was nothing that particularly suggested the criminal in any of their sunburned faces. They looked hot and weary with the journey, and though their expression was perhaps a little hard, they looked like harvest hands traveling in search of work. One, who was quietly smoking, took his pipe from his mouth and spoke to Flett.

"Can't you get us some ice?" he asked. "The water in the tank isn't fit to drink."

"They haven't any here. You'll have to wait until

we get to the junction," Flett told him, and drew Edgar back into the vestibule.

"We're taking them right along to Regina," he explained. "I'm sorry I couldn't see Mr. Lansing, but I'll ride over as soon as I'm sent back. If he's likely to be away, he'd better send word to the station."

"I don't expect he'll leave the farm during the next few weeks," said Edgar.

Then one of the constables looked in.

"Conductor says he can't hold up the train."

"I'll be off," said Edgar, with a smile at Flett. "This should mean promotion; it's a fine piece of work."

He jumped down as the train pulled out and hurried back to the store where Miss Taunton was eagerly awaiting news. Soon afterward he left; and as he rode up to the homestead day was breaking, but he found George already at work in the stable.

"It's lucky we don't need your horse. If you're going to keep up this kind of thing, you had better buy an automobile," he remarked.

Edgar laughed.

"I don't feel remarkably fresh, but I'll hold out until to-night. There's the fallowing to be got on with; I suppose nothing must interfere with that. But aren't you up a little earlier than usual?"

"I want to haul in the posts for the new fence. Grierson has his hands full, and now that there are four of us, Jake spends so much time in cooking."

"A reckless waste of precious minutes!" Edgar exclaimed ironically. "If one could only get over these troublesome bodily needs, you could add hours

of work to every week and make Sylvia Marston rich. By the way, Jake's cooking is getting awful."

He put up his horse and busied himself with several tasks before he went in to breakfast. When it was finished, and the others went out, he detained George.

"What did you think of that meal?" he asked.

"Well," said George, "it might have been better."

Edgar laughed scornfully.

"It would take some time to tell you my opinion, but I may as well point out that you're paying a big bill for stores to Taunton, though we never get anything fit to eat. Helen and I were talking over your account, and she wondered what we did with the things, besides giving me an idea. It's this — why don't you tell Grierson to bring out his wife?"

"I never thought of it. She might not come; and she may not cook much better than Jake."

"She certainly couldn't cook worse! I expect she would save her wages, and she would set a hired man free. Jake can drive a team."

"It's a good idea," George agreed. "Send Grierson in."

The man came a few minutes later.

"We get on pretty well; I suppose you are willing to stay with me?" George said to him.

Grierson hesitated and looked disturbed.

"The fact is, I'd be very sorry to leave; but I'm afraid I'll have to by and by. You see, I've got to find a place I can take my wife to."

"Can she cook?"

"Yes," said Grierson, indicating the remnants on the table with contempt. "She would do better than

this with her eyes shut! Then," he continued eagerly, "she can wash and mend clothes. I've noticed that you and Mr. West throw half your things away long before you need to."

"That's true," Edgar admitted. "It's the custom of the country; time's too valuable to spend in mending anything, though I've noticed that one or two of the people who tell you about the value of time get through a good deal of it lounging round the Sachem. Anyway, amateur laundering's an abomination, and I'm most successful in washing the buttons and wristbands off." He turned to his companion. "George, you'll have to send for Mrs. Grierson."

The matter was promptly arranged, and when Grierson went out with a look of keen satisfaction, Edgar laughed.

"I feel like pointing out how far an idea can go. Helen only thought of making me a little more comfortable, and you see the result of it — Grierson and his wife united, things put into shape here, four people content! Of course, one could cite a more striking example; I mean when Sylvia Marston thought you had better go out and look after her farm. There's no need to mention the far-reaching consequences that opinion had."

"I volunteered to go out," George corrected him.

"Well," said Edgar, "I quite believe you did so. But you're no doubt pining to get at the fence."

They went off to work, but Edgar, driving the gang-plow through the stubble under a scorching sun, thought that Sylvia's idea might bear more fruit than she had calculated on, and that it would be bitter to her. His mind, however, was chiefly occupied with

a more attractive person, and once when he turned the heavy horses at the end of the furrows he said softly, "May I deserve her!" and looked up with a tense expression in his hot face, as if making some firm resolve, which was a procedure that would have astonished even those who knew him well.

A week passed, each day growing brighter and hotter, until the glare flung back by sandy soil and whitening grass became painful, and George and his assistants discarded most of their clothing when they went about their tasks. The oats began to show a silvery gleam as they swayed in the strong light; the wheat was changing color, and there were warm coppery gleams among the heavy ears; horses and cattle sought the poplars' shade. Then one evening when the Grants had driven over, Flett arrived at the homestead, and, sitting on the stoop as the air grew cooler, related his adventures.

"I guess my chiefs wouldn't be pleased to hear me; we're not encouraged to talk, but there's a reason for it, as you'll see when I'm through," he said, and plunged abruptly into his narrative.

It proved to be a moving tale of weary rides in scorching heat and in the dusk of night, of rebuffs and daunting failures. Flett, as he admitted, had several times been cleverly misled and had done some unwise things, but he had never lost his patience nor relaxed his efforts. Slowly and doggedly, picking up scraps of information where he could, he had trailed his men to the frontier, where his real troubles had begun. Once that he crossed it, he had no authority, and the American sheriffs and deputies were not invariably sympathetic. Some, he concluded, were un-

duly influenced by local opinion, which was not in favor of interfering with people who confined their depredations to Canadian horses. Others, who acknowledged past favors from Regina, foresaw troublesome complications before he could be allowed to deport the offenders; but some, with a strong sense of duty, offered willing help, and that was how he had been able to make the arrests on Canadian soil.

"Now," he concluded, "we tracked these men from point to point and I've evidence to prove most of their moves, but they never had the four horses in a bunch until they made Montana, which is a point against us. We can show they were working as a gang, that they were altogether with the horses on American soil, but as we haven't corralled the only man Mr. Grant could swear to, there's only one way of proving how they got them. You see where all this leads?"

"It looks as if you depended on my evidence for a conviction," said George.

Flett nodded.

"You saw Mr. Grant attacked and the horses run off. You can identify one man, and we'll connect him with the rest."

He took out a paper and handed it to George.

"It's my duty to serve you with this; and now that it's done, I'll warn you to watch out until after the trial. If we can convict these fellows, we smash the crowd, but we'd be helpless without you."

George opened the document and found it a formal summons to attend the court at Regina on a date specified. Then he produced another paper and gave it to Flett with a smile.

"The opposition seem to recognize my importance, and they move more quickly than the police."

The trooper took the letter, which was typed and bore no date or name of place.

"'Keep off this trial and you'll have no more trouble,'" he read aloud. "'Back up the police and you'll be sorry. If you mean to drop them, drive over to the Butte, Thursday, and get supper at the Queen's.'"

"Yesterday was Thursday, and I didn't go," George said after a moment's silence.

The quiet intimation was not a surprise to any of them, and Flett nodded as he examined the letter.

"Not much of a clue," he remarked. "Toronto paper that's sold at every store; mailed two stations down the line. Nobody would have met you at the Queen's, but most anybody in town would know if you had been there. Anyway, I'll take this along." He rose. "I can't stop, but I want to say we're not afraid of your backing down."

He rode off in a few more minutes and after a while the Grants took their leave, but Flora walked down the trail with George while the team was being harnessed.

"You'll be careful, won't you?" she said. "These men are dangerous; they know yours is the most important evidence. I shall be anxious until the trial."

There was something in her eyes and voice that sent a curious thrill through George.

"I don't think that's needful; I certainly won't be reckless," he said.

Then Flora got into the vehicle; and during the

next week or two George took precautions. Indeed, he now and then felt a little uncomfortable when he had occasion to pass a shadowy bluff. He carried a pistol when he went around the outbuildings at night, and fell into a habit of stopping to listen, ready to strike or shoot, each time he opened the door of one in the dark.

For all that, nothing occurred to excite suspicion, and after a while he felt inclined to smile at his nervousness. At length, one day when the trial was close at hand, and Edgar had gone to the Butte, the mail-carrier brought him a note from Grant.

It consisted of a couple of lines asking him to come over during the evening, and as supper had been finished two hours before, George realized that there was not much time to spare. Laying down the note, he walked to the door and called his Canadian hired man.

"Put the saddle on the brown horse, Jake; I'm going to Grant's."

The man did as he was bidden, and when George was about to mount handed him a repeating rifle.

"Better take this along; cylinder's full," he said. "It will be dark before you get there."

George hesitated. The rifle was heavy, but it was a more reliable weapon than a pistol, and he rode off with it. The sun had dipped when he started, the air was rapidly cooling, and after spending the day sinking holes for fence posts in the scorching sun, he found the swift motion and the little breeze that fanned his face pleasant. To the northwest, a flush of vivid crimson glowed along the horizon, but the sweep of grass was growing dim and a bluff he reached at length stood out, a sharp-cut, dusky mass, against

the fading light. He pulled up his horse on its outskirts. A narrow trail led through the wood, its entrance marked by a dark gap among the shadowy trees, and it somehow looked forbidding. The bluff, however, stretched across his path; it was getting late, and George was a little impatient of the caution he had been forced to exercise. Laying his rifle ready across the saddle, he sent his horse forward.

It was quite dark in the bluff, though here and there he could see a glimmer of faint red and orange between the trees, and the stillness had a slightly disturbing effect on him. Not a leaf moved, the beat of his horse's hoofs rang sharply down the narrow trail above which the thin birch branches met. He wanted to get out into the open, where he could see about, as soon as possible. There was, however, no ostensible cause for uneasiness and he rode on quietly, until he heard a soft rustling among the slender trunks. Pulling up the horse, he called out, and, as he half expected, got no answer. Then he cast a swift glance ahead. There was a gleam of dim light not far away where the trail led out of the bluff. Throwing the rifle to his shoulder, George fired into the shadows.

The horse plunged violently and broke into a frightened gallop. George heard a whistle and a sharper rustling, and rode toward the light at a furious pace. Then his horse suddenly stumbled and came down. The rifle flew out of George's hand, and he was hurled against a tree. The next moment he felt himself rudely seized, and what he thought was a jacket was wrapped about his head. Shaken by his fall, he could make no effective resistance, and he was dragged a few yards through the bush and flung into a wagon.

He tried to pull the jacket from his face, and failed; somebody brutally beat him down against the side of the vehicle when he struggled to get up. He heard a whip crack, the wagon swayed and jolted, and he knew the team was starting at a gallop.

CHAPTER XXIX

FLORA'S ENLIGHTENMENT

IT was nearly midnight when Edgar returned from the settlement and saw, to his surprise, lights still burning in the homestead. Entering the living-room, he found Grierson sitting there with Jake, and it struck him that they looked uneasy.

"What's keeping you up?" he asked.

"I thought I'd wait for the boss," said the Canadian. "He went over to Grant's after supper, and he's not come back."

"That's curious. He said nothing about going."

"A note came by the mail. It's lying yonder."

Edgar picked it up and brought it near the lamp. The paper was good and printed with Grant's postal address, which was lengthy.

"I figured I'd go and meet him," Jake resumed. "Took the shot-gun and rode through the bluff. Didn't see anything of him, and it struck me Grant might have kept him all night, as it was getting late. He's stayed there before."

Edgar examined the note, for he was far from satisfied. George had only twice spent a night at Grant's, once when he was driving cattle, and again when it would have been risky to face the weather. The paper was undoubtedly Grant's, but Edgar could

not identify the farmer's hand; the notes that had come over had been written by Flora. Then he remembered that George had bought some implements from Grant, and had filed the rancher's receipt. Edgar hurriedly found it and compared it with the letter. Then his face grew troubled, for the writing was not the same.

"I'm afraid Mr. Lansing never got to Grant's," he said. "I'll ride over at once."

"Then I'm coming," Jake said shortly. "I'll bring the gun along."

Grierson lifted a clenched brown hand.

"So am I! If Mr. Lansing's hurt, somebody's got to pay!"

Edgar was stirred by something in their looks and voices; George had gained a hold on these men's loyalty which the regular payment of wages could never have given him. He merely signified assent, and, running out, sprang into the saddle. The others had evidently had their horses ready, for he heard them riding after him in a minute or two, though he was galloping recklessly through the bluff when they came up. The homestead was dark when they reached it, and they shouted once or twice before Grant came down.

"Is George here?" Edgar asked.

"No," said Grant, "we didn't expect him."

"Then get on your clothes quick! There's work on hand!"

Grant brought him in and struck a light, then hurriedly left the room; and Flora came with him, fully dressed, when he reappeared. Edgar supposed she had heard his sharp inquiry at the door, and he no-

ticed that her expression was strained. He threw the note on the table.

"After what you said, I needn't ask if you wrote that."

"I didn't," Grant told him. "It's not like my hand. I suppose Lansing started when he got it and has not come back?"

"You have guessed right. Where are they likely to have waylaid him, and where will they probably take him?"

"The bluff, sure. They might head north for empty country, or south for the frontier."

"The frontier," Flora broke in.

"It's what I think," said Edgar. "Shall I send a man for Flett, or will you?"

"That's fixed, anyway," said a voice outside the open door. "We're not going."

It was obvious that the hired men had followed them as far as the passage, for Grierson, entering the room, explained:

"He means we've made up our minds to look for Mr. Lansing."

Grant nodded in assent.

"Then my man goes. Turn out the boys, Jake; you know the place. I want three horses saddled quick."

"Four," said Flora, firmly. "I'm coming."

Grant did not try to dissuade her.

"Write to Flett," he said.

He went out hastily in search of blankets and provisions, and when he returned, his hired men had gathered about the door and the note was finished. He threw it to one of them.

"Ride with that as hard as you can," he said, and called another. "You'll come with us."

"We're a strong party already," Edgar broke in. "You're leaving the place poorly guarded, and the rustlers may have counted on something of the kind. Suppose they finish their work by driving off every beast that's left as soon as we have gone."

"I've got to take my chances; we'll want the boys to make a thorough search."

Grant swung round toward the remaining men.

"You two will watch out behind the woodstack or in the granary. No stranger's to come near house or stable."

"The woodpile," said Flora, with a hard white face and an ominous sparkle in her eyes. "You would command the outbuildings there. If anybody tries to creep up at night, call once, and then shoot to kill."

Edgar saw that she meant her instructions to be carried out; but he forced a smile.

"And this is the Canadian wheat-belt, which I was told was so peaceful and orderly!"

"It looks as if you had been misinformed," Flora rejoined with a cold collectedness which he thought of as dangerous. "One, however, now and then hears of violent crime in London."

They were mounted in a few minutes, and after a hard ride the party broke up at dawn, dispersing so that each member of it could make independent search and inquiries at the scattered homesteads. Meeting places and means of communication were arranged; but Flora and her father rode together, pushing on steadily southward over the vast gray plain. Little

was said except when they called at some outlying farm, but Grant now and then glanced at the girl's set face with keenly scrutinizing eyes. In the middle of the scorching afternoon he suggested that she should await his return at a homestead in the distance, but was not surprised when she uncompromisingly refused. They spent the night at a small ranch, borrowed fresh horses in the morning, and set out again; but they found no trace of the fugitives during the day, and it was evening when Edgar and Grierson joined them, as arranged, at a lonely farm. The two men rode in wearily on jaded horses, and Flora, who was the first to notice their approach, went out to meet them.

"Nothing?" she said, when she saw their dejected faces.

"Nothing," Edgar listlessly answered. "If the people we have seen aren't in league with the rustlers — and I don't think that's probable — the fellows must have gone a different way."

"They've gone south!" Flora insisted. "We may be a little too far to the east of their track."

"Then, we must try a different line of country to-morrow."

The farmer's wife had promised to find Flora quarters, the men were offered accommodation in a barn, and when the air cooled sharply in the evening, Edgar walked out on to the prairie with the girl. She had kept near him since his arrival, but he was inclined to believe this was rather on account of his association with George than because she found any charm in his society. By and by, they sat down on a low rise from which they could see the sweep of grass run on, chang-

ing to shades of blue and purple, toward the smoky red glare of sunset on its western rim. To the south, it was all dim and steeped in dull neutral tones, conveying an idea of vast distance.

Flora shivered, drawing her thin linen jacket together while she buttoned it, and Edgar noticed something beneath it that broke the outline of her waist.

"What's that at your belt?" he asked.

"A magazine pistol," she answered with a rather harsh laugh, producing the beautifully made weapon.

"It's a pretty thing. I wonder whether you can use it?"

"Will you stand up at about twenty paces and hold out your hat?"

"Certainly not!" said Edgar firmly. "I wouldn't mind putting it on a stick, only that the shot would bring the others out. But I've no doubt you can handle a pistol; you're a curious people."

He thought the last remark was justified. Here was a girl, as refined and highly trained in many ways as any he had met, and yet who owned a dangerous weapon and could use it effectively. Then there was her father, an industrious, peaceable farmer, whose attention was, as a rule, strictly confined to the amassing of money, but who was nevertheless capable of riding or shooting down the outlaws who molested him or his friends. What made the thing more striking was that neither of them had been used to alarms; they had dwelt in calm security until the past twelve months. Edgar, however, remembered that they sprang from a stock that had struggled sternly for existence with forest and flood and frost; no doubt, in time of stress, the strong primitive strain came

uppermost. Their nature had not been altogether softened by civilization. The thought flung a useful light upon Flora's character.

"If the trial's a lengthy one and these fellows hold him up until it's over, it will be a serious thing for George," he resumed, by way of implying that this was the worst that could befall his comrade. "The grain's ripening fast, and he hasn't made his arrangements for harvest yet. Men seem pretty scarce around here, just now."

"It's a good crop; I'm glad of that," said Flora, willing to avoid the graver side of the topic. "Mr. Lansing was anxious about it, but this harvest should set him on his feet. I suppose he hasn't paid off the full price of the farm."

"As a matter of fact, he hasn't paid anything at all."

"Then has he only rented the place?"

There was surprise and strong interest in the girl's expression and Edgar saw that he had made a telling admission. However, he did not regret it.

"No," he said; "that's not the case, either. The farm is still Mrs. Marston's."

"Ah! There's something I don't understand."

Edgar was sorry for her, and he felt that she was entitled to an explanation. Indeed, since George was strangely unobservant, he thought it should have been made earlier; but the matter had appeared too delicate for him to meddle with. Now, however, when the girl's nature was strongly stirred, there was a risk that, supposing his comrade was discovered wounded or was rescued in some dramatic way, she might be driven to a betrayal of her feelings that would seri-

ously embarrass George and afterward cause her distress.

"George," he explained, "is merely carrying on the farm as Mrs. Marston's trustee."

"But that hardly accounts for his keen eagerness to make his farming profitable. It strikes one as springing from something stronger than his duty as trustee."

Edgar nodded.

"Well, you see, he is in love with her!"

Flora sat quite still for a moment or two, and then laughed — a little, bitter laugh; she was overstrained and could not repress it. A flood of hot color surged into her face, but in another moment she had recovered some degree of composure.

"So that is why he came out?" she said.

"Yes; he was in love with her before she married Marston. At least, that's his impression."

"His impression?" echoed Flora, keenly anxious to cover any signs of the shock she had received and to learn all that could be told. "Do you mean that Mr. Lansing doesn't know whether he is in love with her or not?"

"No, not exactly!" Edgar felt that he was on dangerous ground. "I'm afraid I can't quite explain what I really do mean. George, of course, is convinced about the thing; but I've a suspicion that he may be mistaken; though he'd be very indignant if he heard me say so."

He paused, doubtful whether he was handling the matter prudently, but he felt that something must be done to relieve the strain, and continued:

"George has the faculty of respectful admiration

highly developed, but he doesn't use it with much judgment; in fact, he's a rather reckless idealist. There are excuses for him; he was never much thrown into women's society."

"You think that explains it?" Flora forced a smile. "But go on."

"My idea is that George has been led by admiration and pity, and not by love at all. I don't think he knows the difference; he's not much of a psychologist. Then, you see, he's thorough, and having got an idea into his mind, it possesses him and drives him to action. He doesn't stop to analyze his feelings."

"So he came out to look after Mrs. Marston's property because he felt sorry for her, and believed her worthy of respect? What is your opinion of her?"

"I'll confess that I wish she hadn't captivated George."

Flora's face grew very scornful.

"I haven't your chivalrous scruples; and I know Mrs. Marston. She's utterly worthless! What is likely to happen when your comrade finds it out?"

Then she rose abruptly.

"After all, that's a matter which chiefly concerns Mr. Lansing, and I dare say the woman he believes in will be capable of dealing with the situation. Let's talk of something else."

They turned back toward the farm, but Edgar found it difficult to start a fresh topic. All the workings of his mind centered upon George, and he suspected that his companion's thoughts had a similar tendency. It was getting dark when they rejoined the rest of the party, and the next morning Flett and another constable rode in. They had discovered

nothing, but as they were ready to take up the trail, Grant left the task to them and turned back with his men.

Flora long remembered the dreary two day's ride, for although she had borne it with courage, Edgar's news had caused her a painful shock. She had, from the beginning, been strongly drawn to George, and when he had been carried off the knowledge that she loved him had been brought home to her. Now, looking back with rudely opened eyes, there was little comfort in recognizing that he had made no demands on her affection. Bitter as she was, she could not blame him; she had been madly foolish and must suffer for it. She called her pride to the rescue, but it failed her. The torturing anxiety about the man's fate remained, and with it a humiliating regret, which was not altogether selfish, that it was Sylvia Marston he had chosen. Sylvia, who was clever, had, of course, tricked him; but this was no consolation. It was, however, needful to hide her feelings from her father and assume an interest in his remarks, though, when he spoke, it was always of Lansing and what had probably befallen him.

The prairie was dazzlingly bright, the trail they followed was thick with fine black dust, and most of the day the heat was trying; the girl felt utterly jaded and very heavy of heart, but when it appeared desirable she forced herself to talk. Her father must never suspect her folly, though she wondered uneasily how far she might have betrayed it to West. Reaching the homestead at length, she resumed her duties, and anxiously waited for news of George. Once that she

heard he was safe, it would, she thought, be easier to drive him out of her mind forever.

As it happened, George had received only a few bruises in the bluff, and, after realizing that there was no chance of escape for the present, he lay still in the bottom of the wagon. He blamed himself for riding so readily into the trap, since it was obvious that his assailants had known he was going to visit Grant, and had stretched a strand of fence wire or something of the kind across the trail. They would have removed it afterward and there would be nothing left to show what had befallen him. This, however was a matter of minor consequence and he endeavored to determine which way his captors were driving. Judging the nature of the trail by the jolting, he decided that they meant to leave the wood where he entered it, which suggested that they were going south, and this was what he had anticipated. Though he was sore from the effect of his fall and the rough handling which had followed it, he did not think he would suffer any further violence, so long as he made no attempt to get away. The men, no doubt, only intended to prevent his giving evidence, by keeping him a prisoner until after the trial.

When morning came, the wagon was still moving at a good pace, though the roughness of the motion indicated that it was not following a trail. This was all George could discover, because one of the men tied his arms and legs before removing the jacket which had muffled his head.

"I guess you can't get up, but it wouldn't be wise to try," the fellow pointed out significantly.

George took the hint. He meant to escape and attend the court, but he had no wish to ruin any chance of his doing so by making a premature attempt. His captors meant to prevent his seeing which way they were going, but he could make out that the sky was brightest on the left side of the wagon, which indicated that they were heading south. They stopped at noon in a thick bluff, from which, when he was released and allowed to get down, he could see nothing of the prairie. Only one man remained to watch him; but as he was armed, and George could hear the others not far away, he decided that his escape must be postponed.

During the afternoon, they went on again, George occupying his former position in the bottom of the wagon, where it was unpleasantly hot; but the strongest glare was now on his right side, which showed him that they were still holding south. Their destination was evidently the American frontier. In the evening they camped near a thicket of low scrub, and after supper George was permitted to wander about and stretch his aching limbs. It was rolling country, broken by low rises, and he could not see more than a mile or two. There was nothing that served as a landmark, and as soon as he began to stroll away from the camp he was sharply recalled. In the end, he sat down to smoke, and did not move until he was told to get into the wagon, where a blanket was thrown him. So far, he had been permitted to see only one of his captors near at hand.

The next morning they set out again. George thought that fresh horses had been obtained in the night, because they drove at a rapid pace most of the

day; and he was tired and sore with the jolting when they camped in another bluff at sunset. Two more days were spent in much the same way; and then late at night they stopped at a little building standing in the midst of an unbroken plain, and George was released and told to get out. One of the men lighted a lantern and led him into an empty stable, built of thick sods. It looked as if it had not been occupied for a long time, but part of it had been roughly boarded off, as if for a harness room or store.

"You have got your blanket," said his companion. "Put it down where you like. There's only one door to this place, and you can't get at it without passing me. I got a sleep in the wagon and don't want any more to-night."

George heard the vehicle jolt away, and sat down to smoke while the beat of hoofs gradually sank into the silence of the plain. Then he wrapped his blanket about him and went to sleep on the earthen floor.

CHAPTER XXX

THE ESCAPE

GEORGE got up the next morning feeling cramped and sore after his journey, and carefully looked about. The building had solid walls of sod; such rude stalls as it had been fitted with had been removed, perhaps for the sake of the lumber. He could not reach the door without alarming his jailer, who had taken up his quarters behind the board partition; and there was only one small window, placed high up and intended mainly for ventilation. The window was very dusty, but it opened and George could see out by standing up, though the aperture was not large enough to squeeze through.

Outside stood some timbers which had once formed part of a shack, and a few strands of fence wire, trailing from tottering posts, ran into the grass. The place appeared to have been a farm, whose owner had, no doubt, abandoned it after finding the soil too light, or after losing a crop by frost; but George was more curious to discover if there were any other homesteads in the vicinity. His view was restricted, but there was no sign of life on the quarter-circle it commanded. A flat, grassy waste, broken only by a few clumps of brush, ran back to the horizon, and by the cold blue of the sky and the drift of a few light clouds floating before the prevalent westerly wind, he knew

he was looking north. This was the way he must take if he could escape, but there was no house in which he could seek refuge, and scarcely any cover. It was clear that he must obtain a good start before he was missed. He had an idea that he would escape, though he admitted that it was more optimistic than rational.

Then he turned with a start, to see his jailer standing beside him, grinning. The man had a hard, determined face.

"Guess you can't get out that way; and it wouldn't be much use, anyhow," he drawled. "The country's pretty open; it would take you a mighty long while to get out of sight."

"That's how it struck me," George confessed with an air of good-humored resignation. "Do you mean to keep me here any time?"

"Until the trial," the other answered, standing a little away from him with his hand thrust suggestively into a pocket. "We'll be glad to get rid of you when it's finished, but you certainly can't get away before we let you go."

George cast a glance of keen but unobtrusive scrutiny at the man. They were, he thought, about equal in physical strength; the other's superiority consisted in his being armed, and George had no doubt that he was proficient with his weapons. He had seen a rifle carried into the building, the man's hand was now resting on a pistol, and there was a light ax outside. It looked as if an attempt to escape would be attended with a serious risk, and George realized that he must wait until chance or some slackening of vigilance on his custodians' part equalized matters.

He was given breakfast, and afterward told that he could go out and split some wood, which he was glad to do. There was a pile of branches and a few rotten boards that had once formed part of the shack, and he set to work to break them up, while the rustler sat and smoked in the doorway. The man ran no risk in doing so; there was not a bush within a quarter of a mile, and George knew that a bullet would speedily cut short his flight. He could see nothing that promised a secure hiding place all the way to the sky-line, and he thought that the plain ran on beyond it, as little broken. When he had cut some wood, he turned back toward the door, and the man regarded him with a meaning smile.

"Come in, if you want; but leave the ax right there," he said.

He moved back a few paces, out of reach of a sudden spring, as George entered, and the latter realized that he did not mean to be taken by surprise. During the afternoon, another man arrived on horseback with some provisions and remained until George went to sleep. The following morning, the stranger had disappeared, but he came again once or twice, and this was all that broke the monotony of the next few days. George, however, was beginning to feel the strain; his nerves were getting raw, the constant watchfulness was wearing him. The trial would now be beginning, and it was time the binders were driven into his grain; the oats would be ripe, and his neighbors would pick up all the Ontario hands who reached the settlement. Another day passed, and he was feeling desperate when the relief watcher arrived in the afternoon. Listening with strained attention, he heard the men

talking outside. Only a few words reached him, but one was "adjourned," and it filled him with fresh determination. If he could escape, it might not be too late.

It was an oppressive afternoon; the fresh northwest breeze had dropped, the sky was clouded, the air hot and heavy. Both men remained about the building, but George sat quietly on the earth floor, smoking and waiting for night. A few large drops of rain fell, splashing upon roof and grass while he ate his supper, but it stopped, and the evening was marked by a deep stillness. He felt listless and disinclined to move; his guards, to judge by their voices, for they were playing cards outside, were languidly irritable.

Dusk came and a thick obscurity, unlike the usual clearness of the summer nights, shut in the lonely building. It was intensely dark in the stable; George could not see the relief man's horse, though he could now and then hear it move. Voices rose at intervals from beyond the partition, but they ceased at last and only an occasional crackle of the dry grass that served for seats and bedding told that one at least of the rustlers was keeping watch. George felt his limbs quiver while he waited, and he was conscious of an unpleasant tension on his nerves. There was thunder brewing, and he thought the storm might offer him an opportunity for getting out.

At length it struck him that the silence was unusually deep. Rising to his feet he moved about. There was no challenge; and by way of further experiment, he kicked his tin plate so that it rattled. Still nobody called to him, though the horse made a little noise in moving. George sat down and took off

his boots while his heart throbbed painfully. It looked as if his guards had gone to sleep. He moved a few yards, stopped to listen, and went on for several paces more. There was no sound yet beyond the partition, and he crept softly past the horse; he longed to lead it out, but decided that the risk would be too great.

Then he stood in the gap between the wall and the partition, straining eyes and ears, and wondering where the rifle lay. He could see nothing, however; and, creeping on cautiously, with tingling nerves and an intolerable feeling of suspense, he drew level with the doorway. It was hard to refrain from leaping out, but this might make some noise. Crossing the threshold with careful movements, he made for the spot where he had cut the wood. He struck something that rattled, but he found the ax and the feel of it sent a thrill through him. It was light enough to be carried easily; and he did not mean to be recaptured.

For some minutes he moved straight on, hurting his feet on the stronger grass stalks; and then, sitting down, he hastily put on his boots. After that he broke into a steady run, which he meant to keep up as long as possible. He was now anxious that the threatened storm should not break, because if the rustlers had gone to sleep, the longer they remained so the better. He failed to understand how he had escaped; perhaps his guards had been lulled into false security by his tranquil demeanor; perhaps they had trusted to each other; or one, rendered listless by the tension in the air, had relaxed his watchfulness for a few moments. This, however, did not matter.

George was free; and he only wished that he had some idea as to where he was heading. He wanted to place a long distance between him and the stable by morning.

Dripping with perspiration, breathing hard, he kept up a steady pace for, so he thought, an hour, after which he walked a mile or two, and then broke into a run again. The grass was short; he struck no brush, and the ax did not encumber him. He imagined that dawn must be getting near when a dazzling flash swept the prairie and there was a long reverberatory rumbling overhead. He was almost blinded and bewildered, doubly uncertain where he was going; and then a great stream of white fire fell from the zenith. The thunder that followed was deafening, and for the next few minutes blaze succeeded blaze, and there was a constant crashing and rumbling overhead. After that came a rush of chilly wind and the air was filled with falling water.

A hot, steamy smell rose about him; but George, who had been walking again, began to run. He must use every exertion, for if he were right in concluding that he had been detained on American soil, his pursuers would follow him north, and when daylight came a mounted man's view would command a wide sweep of level prairie. The storm passed away, muttering, into the distance; the rain ceased, and the air was fresh and cool until the sun sprang up. It was on his right hand, he thought he had kept his line; but he stopped to consider on the edge of a ravine. The sides of the hollow were clothed with tall, wet grass and brush; it would offer good cover, but he could hardly avoid leaving a track if he followed it,

and his pursuers would search such spots. It seemed wiser to push on across the plain.

Descending through the thinnest brush he could find, he stopped for a drink from the creek at the bottom, and then went on as fast as possible. He was becoming conscious of a pain in his left side; one foot felt sore; and as the sun got hotter a longing to lie down a while grew steadily stronger. Still, he could see nothing but short, gray grass ahead; he must hold on; there might be bluffs or broken country beyond the skyline.

At length a small square block cut against the dazzling brightness and slowly grew into a lonely homestead. After some consideration, George headed for it, and toward noon reached a little, birch-log dwelling, with a sod stable beside it. Both had an uncared-for appearance, which suggested their owner's poverty. As George approached the door, a gaunt, hard-faced man in dilapidated overalls came out and gazed at him in surprise. George's clothing, which had been torn when he was seized in the bluff, had further suffered during the deluge. He looked a weary, ragged outcast.

"Can you give me something to eat and hire me a horse?" he asked.

The farmer seemed suspicious.

"Guess I want my horses for the binder; I'm harvesting oats."

"I'll pay you well for the time you lose," George broke out.

"How much?"

Thrusting his hand into his pocket, George found

with dismay that his wallet, which contained some bills, was missing.

"Anything you ask in reason, but you'll have to take a check on a Brandon bank. Have you got a pen and paper in the house?"

"How am I to know your check's good?" The farmer laughed ironically.

George was doubtful of the man, but he must take a risk.

"My name's Lansing, from the Marston homestead, beyond Sage Butte. It's a pretty big place; any check I give you will be honored."

The farmer looked at him with growing interest.

"Well," he said, "you can't have my horse."

It was evident from his manner that reasoning would be useless.

"How does Sage Butte lie from here?" George asked him.

"Can't tell you; I've never been in the place."

George realized that he had blundered, both in calling at the homestead and in mentioning his name, which had figured in the newspaper account of the attack on Grant. The farmer, it seemed, had a good idea of the situation, and if not in league with the rustlers, was afraid of them. George was wasting time and giving information that might put his pursuers on his trail. In the meanwhile he noticed a face at the window and a voice called to the man, who stepped back into the house and appeared again with a big slab of cold pie.

"Take this and light out," he said.

Having eaten nothing since his supper, George was

glad of the food; but he walked on smartly for an hour before he sat down in a clump of brush and made a meal. Then he lighted his pipe and spent a couple of hours in much needed rest. Haste was highly desirable; he had no doubt that he was being followed, but he could go no farther for a while.

It was very hot when he got up; he was sore all over, and his foot was paining, but he set off at a run and kept it up until he had crossed a rise two miles away. The country was getting more broken, which was in his favor, because the clumps of bush and the small elevations would tend to hide him. He went on until dusk, without finding any water; and then lay down among some tall grass in the open. There was a little bluff not far off, but if the rustlers came that way, he thought they would search it. It grew cold as darkness crept down; indeed he imagined that the temperature had fallen to near freezing-point, as it sometimes does on the plains after a scorching day.

Part of the night he lay awake, shivering; but during the rest he slept; and he rose at dawn, very cold and wet with dew. His foot was very sore, and he had a sharp pain in his side. For the first hour, walking cost him an effort; but as he grew warmer it became less difficult, and his foot felt easier. Then, as he crossed a slight elevation, he saw a faint gray smear on the far horizon and it sent a thrill through him. Canadian locomotives burning native coal pour out clouds of thick black smoke which can be seen a long way in the clear air of the prairie. George was thirty or forty feet, he thought, above the general level of the plain, the light was strong, and he imagined that it would take him most of the day to reach the spot

over which the smoke had floated. He was, however, heading for the track, and he gathered his courage.

He saw no more smoke for a long time — the increasing brightness seemed to diminish the clarity of the air. Before noon the pain in his side had become almost insupportable, and his head was swimming; he felt worn out, scarcely able to keep on his feet, but again a gray streak on the horizon put heart into him. It did not appear to move for a while, and he thought it must have been made by a freight-engine working about a station. Then, as he came down the gradual slope of a wide depression, a long bluff on its opposite verge cut the skyline, a hazy smear of neutral color. He determined to reach the wood and lie down for a time in its shadow.

It scarcely seemed to grow any nearer, and an hour had passed before it assumed any regularity of outline. When it had grown into shape, George stopped and looked about. It was fiercely hot, the grass was dazzlingly bright, there was no house or sign of cultivation as far as his sight ranged; but on glancing back he started as he saw three small mounted figures on the plain. They had not been there when he last turned around, and they were moving, spread out about a mile apart. It was obvious that the rustlers were on his trail. For another moment he looked at the bluff, breathing hard, with his lips tight set. If he could reach the wood before he was overtaken, it would offer him cover from a bullet, and if he could not evade his enemies, he might make a stand with the ax among the thicker trees. It was an irrational idea, as he half recognized; but he had grown savage

with fatigue, and he had already suffered as much as he was capable of bearing at the hands of the cattle thieves. Now he meant to turn on them; but he would be at their mercy in the open.

His weariness seemed to fall away from him to give place to grim fury as he broke into a run, and he did not look back for a while. When he did so, the figures had grown larger; one could see that they were moving swiftly; and the bluff was still far away. George believed that he had been noticed and he strove to quicken his pace. The beat of hoofs was in his ears when he next looked around; the three horsemen were converging, growing more distinct; and the bluff was still a mile ahead. He was stumbling and reeling, his hat fell off, and he dared not stop to pick it up.

A mile was covered; he would not look back again, though the thud of hoofs had swelled into a sharp staccato drumming. With face fiercely set and the perspiration dripping from him, he held on, scorched and partly dazzled by the glare. The wood was getting closer; he thought it was scarcely a quarter of a mile off. His heart throbbed madly, the pain in his side had grown excruciating; but somehow he must keep going. His eyes smarted with the moisture that ran into them, his lips and mouth were salty; he was suffering torment; but he kept on his feet.

At length, when the trees were close ahead, a faint smudge of smoke appeared on the edge of them; there was a report like a whipcrack, and he stopped in despair. His last refuge was held against him. Then, as he turned in savage desperation to meet the rustlers' onslaught with the ax, he saw there were only two horsemen, who pulled up suddenly, about sixty yards

away. The third was not visible, but his horse, which had fallen, was struggling in the grass. As the meaning of this dawned on George he broke in a wild, breathless yell of exultation; there was another crack behind him, and the two horsemen wheeled. They were not too soon, for a mounted man in khaki with something that flashed across his saddle was riding hard from behind the bluff to cut them off. Another appeared, going at a furious gallop, and George stood watching while the four figures grew smaller upon the prairie.

Turning at a shout he saw Flett and Edgar walking toward him, and he went with them to the fallen horse. A man lay, gray in face, among the grass, held down by the body of the animal which partly rested upon him.

"Get me out," he begged hoarsely. "Leg's broke."

George felt incapable of helping. He sat down while the other two extricated the man; then Flett placed his carbine against the horse's head, and after the report it ceased its struggling.

"She came down on me sudden; couldn't get my foot clear in time," the rustler explained.

"You had to be stopped. I sighted at a hundred; a quick shot," Flett remarked. "Is there anything else the matter except your leg?"

"I guess it's enough," said the helpless man.

Flett turned to George.

"Walk into the bluff and you'll strike our camp. West must stay with me until we put on some fixing that will hold this fellow's leg together."

George did as he was bidden, and sat down again limply when he reached an opening in the wood where

a pile of branches, with a kettle suspended over them, had been laid ready for lighting. Presently the others rejoined him.

"The fellow can't be moved until we get a wagon," said Flett. "We've been looking for you all over the country, but it was quite a while before we got a hint that sent us down this way. We had stopped in the bluff when we saw a fellow running with three mounted men after him, and we lay close, expecting to get the bunch. It's unfortunate they got too near you and I had to shoot, but I guess the boys will bring them back."

Edgar looked at his comrade reproachfully.

"If you could only have sprinted a little and kept ahead, we would either have outflanked them or have had the finest imaginable ride with every chance of running the fellows down. As things turned out, I couldn't go off with the troopers until I found that you had got through unhurt."

"I'm sorry," George told him, with a little dry laugh. "But I don't think I spared any effort during the last quarter of a mile."

Then he related his adventures, and answered a number of questions.

"You'll take my horse," said Flett, "and start for the railroad as soon as you feel able. Get on to Regina by the first train; judging by the last wire I got, you'll still be in time. West had better go with you to the station, and he can send a wagon for the man who's hurt. Now I guess we'll get you something to eat."

"I shouldn't mind," said George. "It's twenty-

four hours since my last meal, and that one was remarkably small."

He drank a canful of cold tea, and then went suddenly to sleep while the others lighted the fire.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE REACTION

THE trial at Regina proved sensational. Crimes attended with violence were not unknown in the vicinity, and cattle were now and then stolen in the neighboring province of Alberta; but that such things as the prosecutor's tale revealed should happen aroused wide-spread astonishment and virtuous indignation. Nevertheless, they were proved, for Flett had procured a number of witnesses and, what was more, had secured their attendance.

In addition to this, other offenses were hinted at; the doings of an organized gang of desperadoes and their accomplices were detailed, and facts were brought to light which made the withdrawal of the Sachem license inevitable. The defense took strong exception to this mode of procedure, pointing out that the court was only concerned with a specified offense, and that it was not permissible to drag in extraneous and largely supposititious matter. During the sweltering days the trial lasted, there were brisk encounters between the lawyers, and several points the prosecution sought to prove were ruled irrelevant. As a climax, came George's story, which caused a sensation, though the close-packed assembly felt that he scarcely did justice to his theme.

In concluding, the Crown prosecutor pointed out

how rapidly the outbreaks of turbulent lawlessness had spread. They were all, he contended, connected with and leading up to the last outrage, of which the men before him were accused. It was obvious that this unruliness must be sternly stamped out before it spread farther, and if the court agreed with him that the charge was fully proved, he must press for a drastic and deterrent penalty.

The odds were heavily against the defense from the beginning. The credibility of Flett's witnesses could not be assailed, and cross-examination only threw a more favorable light upon their character. Inside the court, and out of it as the newspapers circulated, Grant stood revealed as a fearless citizen, with a stern sense of his duty to the community; George, somewhat to his annoyance, as a more romantic personage of the same description, and Hardie, who had been brought in to prove certain points against which the defense protested, as one who had fought and suffered in a righteous cause.

In the end, the three prisoners were convicted, and when the court broke up the police applied for several fresh warrants, which were issued.

As George was walking toward his hotel, he met Flett, to whom he had not spoken since they separated in the bluff.

"I was waiting for you," said the constable. "I'm sorry we'll have to call you up again as soon as the rustler's leg is better. He's in the guard-room, and the boys got one of the other fellows; but we can talk about it on the train. I'm going back to my post."

George arranged to meet him, and they were sitting in a roomy smoking compartment as the big express

sped across wide gray levels and past vast stretches of ripening grain, when the next allusion was made to the matter.

"I suppose you'll be sergeant shortly," George remarked.

"Corporal comes first," said Flett. "They stick to the regular rotation."

"That's true, but they seem to use some discretion in exceptional cases. I hardly think you'll remain a corporal."

Flett's eyes twinkled.

"I did get something that sounded like a hint. I'll confess that I felt like whooping after it."

"You have deserved all you'll get," George declared.

They spent the night at a junction, where Flett had some business, and it was the next evening when the local train ran into Sage Butte. The platform was crowded and as George and Flett alighted, there was a cheer and, somewhat to their astonishment, the reeve of the town advanced to meet them.

"I'm here to welcome you in the name of the citizens of the Butte," he said. "We have to request the favor of your company at supper at the Queen's."

"It's an honor," George responded. "I'm sensible of it; but, you see, I'm in a hurry to get back to work and I wired for a team. My harvest should have been started a week ago."

"Don't you worry 'bout that," said the reeve. "It wasn't our wish that you should suffer through discharging your duty, and we made a few arrangements. Four binders have been working steady in your oats, and if you don't like the way we have fixed things, you can alter them to-morrow."

Then West touched George's arm.

"You'll have to come. They've got two other victims — Hardie and Grant — and the supper's ready."

The reeve looked at him in stern rebuke.

"That isn't the way to speak of this function, Percy. If you feel like a victim, you can drop right out."

George was touched by the man's intimation. He expressed his satisfaction, and the whole assembly escorted him to the hotel. There he and Grant and Hardie were seated at the top of a long table near the reeve, who made a short opening speech.

"Business first, and then the supper, boys," he said. "Corporal Flett can't come; his bosses wouldn't approve of it; but I'll see it put in the *Sentinel* that he was asked, and we won't mind if that has some effect on them. There's another thing — out of deference to Mr. Hardie and the change in opinion he has ably led — you'll only get tea and coffee at this entertainment. Those who haven't signed his book, must hold out until it's over."

An excellent meal had been finished when he got up again, with three illuminated strips of parchment in his hand.

"I'll be brief, but there's something to be said. Our guests have set us an example which won't be lost. They saw the danger of letting things drift; one of them warned us plainly, although to do so needed grit, and some of us rounded on him, and if the others didn't talk, it was because that wasn't their end of the job. They knew their duty to the country and they did it, though it cost them something. We owe it to them that the police have smashed the rustler gang,

and that from now on no small homesteader can be bluffed or tempted into doing what's sure to bring him into trouble, and no man with a big farm need fear to let his cattle run. What's more, instead of a haunt of toughs and hobos, we're going to have a quiet and prosperous town. I'm now proud that it's my duty to hand our guests the assurance of our grateful appreciation. Corporal Flett's will be sent on to him."

He handed them the parchments, and George felt inclined to blush as he glanced at the decorated words of eulogy; while a half-ironical twinkle crept into Grant's eyes. Then Hardie rose to reply, and faltered once or twice with a sob of emotion in his voice, for the testimonial had a deeper significance to him than it had to the others. His audience, however, encouraged him, and there was a roar of applause when he sat down. Soon after that the gathering broke up.

George went to the parlor, which served as writing-room, and found Flora there. She smiled as she noticed the end of the parchment sticking out of his pocket.

"I dare say you're relieved that the ceremony's over," she said.

"It was a little trying," George confessed. "I was badly afraid I'd have to make a speech, but luckily we had Hardie, who was equal to the task."

"After all, you needn't be ashamed of the testimonial. I really think you deserved it, and I suppose I must congratulate you on the fortunate end of your dramatic adventures."

George stood looking at her. He was somewhat puzzled, for there was a hint of light mockery in her voice.

"I'll excuse you if you feel that it requires an effort," he said.

"Oh, you have had so much applause that mine can hardly count."

"You ought to know that it's my friends' good opinion I really value."

Flora changed the subject.

"You will be driving out in the morning?"

"I'm starting as soon as Edgar has the team ready. There's a good moon and I must get to work the first thing to-morrow."

The girl's face hardened.

"You seem desperately anxious about your crop."

"I think that's natural. There's a good deal to be done and I've lost some time. I came in to write a note before I see what Edgar's doing."

"Then I mustn't disturb you, and it's time I went over to Mrs. Nelson's — she expects me to stay the night. I was merely waiting for a word with my father." She stopped George, who had meant to accompany her. "No, you needn't come — it's only a few blocks away. Get your note written."

Seeing that she did not desire his escort, George let her go; but he frowned as he sat down and took out some paper. Soon afterward Edgar came in, and they drove off in a few more minutes.

"Did you see Miss Grant?" Edgar asked when they were jolting down the rutted trail.

"I did," George said shortly.

"You seem disturbed about it."

"I was a little perplexed," George owned. "There was something that struck me as different in her manner. It may have been imagination, but I

felt she wasn't exactly pleased with me. I can't understand how I have offended her."

"No," said Edgar. "It would have been remarkable if you had done so. I suppose you told her you couldn't rest until you got to work at the harvest?"

"I believe I said something of the kind. What has that to do with it?"

"It isn't very obvious. Perhaps she felt tired or moody; it has been a blazing hot day. There's every sign of its being the same to-morrow. I suppose you'll make a start after breakfast?"

"I'll make a start as soon as it's daylight," George told him.

He kept his word, and for the next few weeks toiled with determined energy among the tall white oats and the coppery ears of wheat. It was fiercely hot, but from sunrise until the light failed, the plodding teams and clinking binders moved round the lessening squares of grain, and ranks of splendid sheaves lengthened fast behind them. The nights were getting sharp, the dawns were cold and clear, and George rose each morning, aching in every limb, but with a keen sense of satisfaction. Each day's work added to the store of money he would shortly hand to Sylvia. He saw little of Flora, but when they met by chance, as happened once or twice, he was still conscious of something subtly unfamiliar in her manner. He felt they were no longer on the old confidential footing; a stronger barrier of reserve had risen between them.

Before the last sheaves were stacked, the days were growing cool. The fresh western breezes had died away, and a faint ethereal haze and a deep stillness had fallen upon the prairie. It was rudely broken

when the thrashers arrived and from early morning the clatter of the engine filled the air with sound. Loaded wagons crashed through the stubble, the voices of dusty men mingled with the rustle of the sheaves, and a long trail of sooty smoke stained the soft blue of the sky.

This work was finished in turn, and day by day the wagons, loaded high with bags of grain, rolled slowly across the broad white levels toward the elevators. Many a tense effort was needed to get them to their destination, for the trails were dry and loose; but markets were strong, and George had decided to haul in all the big crop. Sometimes, though the nights were frosty, he slept beside his jaded team in the shelter of a bluff; sometimes he spent a day he grudged laying straw on a road; rest for more than three or four hours was unknown to him, and meals were snatched at irregular intervals when matters of more importance were less pressing. For all that, he was uniformly cheerful; the work brought him the greatest pleasure he had known, and he had grown fond of the wide, open land, in which he had once looked forward to dwelling with misgivings. The freedom of its vast spaces, its clear air and its bright sunshine, appealed to him, and he began to realize that he would be sorry to leave it, which he must shortly do. Sylvia, it was a pity, could not live in western Canada.

At length, on a frosty evening, he saw the last load vanish into the dusty elevator, and a curious feeling of regret crept over him. It was very doubtful if he would haul in another harvest, and he wondered whether the time would now and then hang heavily on his hands in England. There was a roar of ma-

chinery above him in the tall building that cut sharply against the sky; below, long rows of wagons stood waiting their turn, and the voices of the teamsters, bantering one another, struck cheerfully on his ears. Side-track and little station were bathed in dazzling electric glare, two locomotives were pushing in wheat cars, and lights had begun to glimmer in the wooden houses of the Butte, though all round there was the vast sweep of prairie.

There was a touch of rawness in the picture, a hint of incompleteness, with a promise of much to come. Sage Butte was, perhaps, a trifle barbarous; but its crude frame buildings would some day give place to more imposing piles of concrete and steel. Its inhabitants were passing through a transition stage, showing signs at times of the primitive strain, but, as a rule, reaching out eagerly toward what was new and better. They would make swift progress, and even now he liked the strenuous, optimistic, and somewhat rugged life they led; he reflected that he would find things different in sheltered England.

After giving Grierson a few instructions, George turned away. His work was done; instead of driving home through the sharp cold of the night, he was to spend it comfortably at the hotel.

A week later, he and West drove over to the Grant homestead and found only its owner in the general-room. Grant listened with a rather curious expression when George told him that he was starting for England the following day; and then they quietly talked over the arrangements that had been made for carrying on the farm until Edgar's return, for George's future movements were uncertain. Edgar, however,

was sensible of a constraint in the farmer's manner, which was presently felt by George, and the conversation was languishing when Flora came in. Shortly afterward George said that they must go and Flora strolled toward the fence with him while the team was being harnessed.

"So you are leaving us to-morrow and may not come back?" she said, in an indifferent tone.

"I can't tell what I shall do until I get to England."

Flora glanced at him with a composure that cost her an effort. She supposed his decision would turn upon Mrs. Marston's attitude, but she knew Sylvia well, and had a suspicion that there was a disappointment in store for Lansing. Edgar had explained that he was not rich, and he was not the kind of man Sylvia was likely to regard with favor.

"Well," she said lightly, "when I came in, you really didn't look as cheerful as one might have expected. Are you sorry you are going away?"

"It's a good deal harder than I thought. The prairie seems to have got hold of me; I have good friends here."

"Haven't you plenty in England?"

"Acquaintances; only a few friends. I can't help regretting those I must leave behind. In fact"—he spoke impulsively, expressing a thought that had haunted him—"it would be a relief if I knew I should come back again."

"After all, this is a hard country and we're a rather primitive people."

"You're reliable! Staunch friends, determined enemies; and even among the latter I found a kind of sporting feeling which made it a little easier for one

to forget one's injuries." He glanced at the prairie which stretched away, white and silent, in the clear evening light. "It's irrational in a way, but I'd be glad to feel I was going to work as usual to-morrow."

"I suppose you could do so, if you really wanted to," Flora suggested.

George turned and looked fixedly at her, while a mad idea crept into his mind. She was very alluring; he thought he knew her nature, which was altogether wholesome, and it flashed upon him that many of the excellent qualities she possessed were lacking in Sylvia. Then he loyally drove out the temptation, wondering that it had assailed him, though he was still clearly conscious of his companion's attractiveness.

"No," he said in a somewhat strained voice; "I hardly think that's possible. I must go back."

Flora smiled, though it was difficult. She half believed she could shake the man's devotion to her rival, but she was too proud to try. If he came to her, he must come willingly, and not because she had exerted her utmost power to draw him.

"Well," she responded, "one could consider the reluctant way you spoke the last few words as flattering. I suppose it's a compliment to Canada?"

He failed to understand the light touch of mocking amusement in her tone; it had not dawned on him that this was her defense.

"It's a compliment to the Canadians, though my appreciation can't be worth very much. But I don't feel in a mood to joke. In fact, there's a feeling of depression abroad to-night; even your father seems affected. I'd expected a pleasant talk with him, but we were very dull."

"What made you think he was less cheerful than usual?" Flora cast a quick and rather startled glance at him.

"I don't know, but something seemed wrong. Edgar's the only one who looks undisturbed, and if he talks much going home, he'll get on my nerves."

"It's hardly fair to blame him for a depression that's your fault," said Flora. "You deserve to feel it, since you will go away."

Then Edgar came up with the wagon and George took Flora's hands.

"I shall think of you often," he told her. "It will always be with pleasure. Now and then you might, perhaps, spare a thought for me."

"I think I can promise that," Flora replied quietly.

Then he shook hands with Grant and got into the wagon. Edgar cracked the whip and the team plunged forward. With a violent jolting and a rattle of wheels they left the farm behind and drove out on to the prairie. Flora stood watching them for a while; and then walked back to the house in the gathering dusk with her face set hard and a pain at her heart.

Grant was sitting on the stoop, filling his pipe, but when she joined him he paused in his occupation and pointed toward the plain. The wagon was scarcely discernible, but a rhythmic beat of hoofs still came back through the stillness.

"I like that man, but he's a blamed fool," he remarked.

Strong bitterness was mingled with the regret in his voice, and Flora started. She was glad that the light was too dim for him to see her clearly.

"I wonder what makes you say that?"

"For one thing, he might have done well here." Flora suspected that her father was not expressing all he had meant. "He's the kind of man we want; and now he's going back to fool his life away, slouching round playing games and talking to idle people, in the old country. Guess some girl over there has got a hold on him." Then his indignation flamed out unchecked. "I never could stand those Percy women, anyway; saw a bunch of them, all dress and airs, when I was last in Winnipeg. One was standing outside a ticket-office at Portage, studying the people through an eyeglass on an ivory stick, as if they were some strange savages, and making remarks about them to her friends, though I guess there isn't a young woman in the city with nerve enough to wear the clothes she had on. It makes a sensible man mighty tired to hear those creatures talk."

Flora laughed, rather drearily, though she guessed with some uneasiness the cause of her father's outbreak. It appeared injudicious to offer him any encouragement.

"After all, one must be fair," she said. "I met some very nice people in the old country."

He turned to her abruptly.

"Do you know who has taken Lansing back?" he asked.

"I believe, from something West said, it is Mrs. Marston."

"That trash!" Grant's sharp cry expressed incredulity. "The man can't have any sense! He's going to be sorry all the time if he gets her."

Then he knocked out his pipe, as if he were too indignant to smoke, and went into the house.

CHAPTER XXXII

A REVELATION

IT was a winter evening and Sylvia was standing near the hearth in Mrs. Kettering's hall, where the lamps were burning, though a little pale daylight still filtered through the drizzle outside. Sylvia was fond of warmth and brightness, but she was alone except for Ethel West, who sat writing at a table in a recess, although her hostess had other guests, including a few men who were out shooting. After a while Ethel looked up.

"Have you or Herbert heard anything from George during the last few weeks?" she asked.

Sylvia turned languidly. Her thoughts had been fixed on Captain Bland, whom she was expecting every moment. Indeed, she was anxious to get rid of Ethel before he came in.

"No," she said with indifference. "I think his last letter came a month ago. It was optimistic."

"They seem to have had a good harvest from what Edgar wrote; he hinted that he might make a trip across."

"It's rather an expensive journey."

"That wouldn't trouble Edgar, and there's a reason for the visit. He has made up his mind to start farming and wants to talk over his plans. In fact, he thinks of getting married."

Sylvia showed some interest.

"To whom? Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"I only arrived this morning, and I wrote some time ago, asking if you could meet Stephen and me. You were with the Graysons then, but you didn't answer."

"I forgot; I don't always answer letters. But who is the girl? Not Miss Grant?"

"Helen Taunton. Do you know her?"

Sylvia laughed.

"The storekeeper's daughter! She's passably good-looking and her father's not badly off, but that's about all one could say for her."

"Do you know anything against the girl?"

"Oh, no!" said Sylvia languidly. "She's quite respectable — in fact, they're rather a straight-laced people; and she doesn't talk badly. For all that, I think you'll get a shock if Edgar brings her home."

"That is not George's opinion. We wrote to him."

Sylvia laughed.

"He would believe in anybody who looked innocent and pretty."

Ethel's expression hardened; Sylvia had not been considerate.

"I don't think that's true. He's generous, and though he has made mistakes, it was only because his confidence was misled with a highly finished skill. One wouldn't look for the same ability in a girl brought up in a primitive western town."

"After all," said Sylvia tranquilly, "she is a girl, and no doubt Edgar is worth powder and shot from her point of view."

"It doesn't seem to be a commercial one," Ethel retorted. "Stephen had a very straightforward letter

from this storekeeper. But I'm inclined to think I had better go on with my writing."

Sylvia moved away. She had no reason for being gracious to Ethel, and she took some pleasure in irritating her.

In a few minutes Bland came in. The hall was large, and Ethel was hidden from him in the recess. He strode toward Sylvia eagerly, but she checked him with a gesture.

"You have come back early," she said. "Wasn't the sport good? What has become of Kettering and the others?"

The man looked a little surprised. This was hardly the greeting he had expected, after having been promised a quiet half-hour with Sylvia; but, looking round, he saw the skirt of Ethel's dress and understood. Had it been George she wished to warn, she would have used different means; but Bland, she was thankful, was not hypercritical.

"The sport was poor," he told her. "The pheasants aren't very strong yet, and it was hard to drive them out of the covers. As I'd only a light waterproof, I got rather wet outside the last wood and I left the others. Kettering wanted to see the keeper about to-morrow's beat, but I didn't wait."

"Since you have been in the rain all day, you had better have some tea," said Sylvia. "They'll bring it here, if you ring."

He followed her to a small table across the hall, and after a tray had been set before them they sat talking in low voices. Presently Bland laid his hand on Sylvia's arm.

"You know why I came down," he said. "I must

go back to-morrow and I want the announcement made before I leave."

Sylvia blushed and lowered her eyes.

"Oh, well," she conceded, "you have really been very patient, and perhaps it would be hardly fair to make you wait any longer."

Bland took her hand and held it fast.

"You are worth waiting for! But there were times when it was very hard not to rebel. I'd have done so, only I was afraid."

"You did rebel."

"Not to much purpose. Though no one would suspect it from your looks, you're a very determined person, Sylvia. Now I don't know how to express my feelings; I want to do something dramatic, even if it's absurd, and I can't even speak aloud. Couldn't you have got rid of Miss West by some means?"

"How could I tell what you wished to say?" Sylvia asked with a shy smile. "Besides, Ethel wouldn't go. She stuck there in the most determined fashion!"

"Then we'll have to disregard her. It must be early next year, Sylvia. I'll see Lansing to-morrow."

He continued in a quietly exultant strain, and Sylvia felt relieved that her fate was decided. She had some time ago led him to believe she would marry him; but she had, with vague misgivings and prompted by half-understood reasons, put off a definite engagement. Now she had given her pledge, and though she thought of George with faint regret, she was on the whole conscious of satisfaction. Bland, she believed, had a good deal to offer her which she could not have enjoyed with his rival.

Presently a servant brought Ethel something on a

salver, and a few moments later she approached the other two with a telegram in her hand.

"I thought I had better tell you, Sylvia," she explained. "Stephen has just got a letter from Edgar, written a day or two before he sailed. He should arrive on Saturday, and George is with him."

Sylvia had not expected this and she was off her guard. She started, and sat looking at Ethel incredulously, with something like consternation.

"It's quite true," said Ethel bluntly. "He'll be here in three more days."

Then Sylvia recovered her composure.

"In that case, I'll have to let Muriel know at once; he'll go straight there, and she's staying with Lucy. Perhaps I had better telegraph."

She rose and left them; and Bland sought Mrs. Kettering and acquainted her of his engagement, and begged her to make it known, which she promised to do. He failed to find Sylvia until she was coming down to dinner, when she beckoned him.

"Have you told Susan yet?" she asked.

"Yes," Bland beamed; "I told her at once. I should have liked to go about proclaiming the delightful news!"

Sylvia looked disturbed; Bland could almost have fancied she was angry. As a matter of fact, troubled thoughts were flying through her mind. It was obvious that she would shortly be called upon to face a crisis.

"After all," she said, with an air of resignation which struck him as out of place, "I suppose you had to do so; but you lost no time."

"Not a moment!" he assured her. "I felt I

couldn't neglect anything that brought you nearer to me."

Then they went on, and meeting the other guests in the hall, Sylvia acknowledged the shower of congratulations with a smiling face. She escaped after dinner, however, without a sign to Bland, and did not reappear. During the evening, he found Ethel West sitting alone in a quiet nook.

"Mrs. Marston seemed a little disturbed at the news you gave her," he remarked.

"So I thought," said Ethel.

"I suppose the George you mentioned is her trustee, who went to Canada and took your brother? You once told me something about him."

"Yes," said Ethel. "You seem to have the gift of arriving at correct conclusions."

"He's an elderly man — a business man of his cousin's stamp — I presume?"

Ethel laughed.

"Oh, no; they're of very different type. I should imagine that he's younger than you are. He was at Herbert's one afternoon when you called."

"Ah!" said Bland. "I shall, no doubt, get to know him when next I come down."

Then he talked about other matters until he left her, and after a while he found Kettering alone.

"Did you ever meet George Lansing?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," said his host. "I know his cousin better."

"He has been out in Canada, hasn't he?"

"Yes; went out to look after Mrs. Marston's property. I understand he has been more or less successful."

"When did he leave England?"

Kettering told him, and Bland considered.

"So Lansing has been out, and no doubt going to a good deal of trouble, for two years," he said. "That's something beyond an ordinary executor's duty. What made him undertake it?"

Kettering smiled.

"It's an open secret — you're bound to hear it — that he had an admiration for Sylvia. Still, there's no ground for jealousy. Lansing hadn't a chance from the beginning."

Bland concealed his feelings.

"How is that? He must be an unusually good fellow if he stayed out there to look after things so long."

"For one reason, he's not Sylvia's kind. It was quite out of the question that she should ever have married him."

Feeling that he had, perhaps, said too much, Kettering began to talk of the next day's sport; and soon afterward Bland left him and went out on the terrace to smoke and ponder. Putting what he had learned together, he thought he understood the situation, and it was not a pleasant one, though he was not very indignant with Sylvia. It looked as if she made an unfair use of Lansing's regard for her, unless, in spite of Kettering's opinion, she had until lately been undecided how to choose between them. Nevertheless, Bland could not feel that he had now been rudely undeceived, for he had always recognized some of Sylvia's failings. He did not expect perfection; and he could be generous, when he had won.

He asked Sylvia no injudicious questions when they met the next morning, and during the day he called on

Herbert Lansing, who was back in his office. The latter heard him explain his errand with somewhat mixed feelings, for there were certain rather troublesome facts that must be mentioned.

"Well," he said, "I have, of course, no objections to make; but, as one of her trustees, it's my duty to look after Sylvia's interests. As you know, she is not rich."

"I suppose these points must be talked over," Bland said, with indifference.

"It's usual, and in the present case, necessary. What provision are you able to make?"

Bland looked a little uncomfortable. "As a matter of fact, I'd find it difficult to make any provision. I get along fairly well, as it is, but I've only about four hundred a year besides my pay."

"How far does your pay go?" Herbert asked dryly.

"It covers my mess bills and a few expenses of that nature."

Herbert leaned back in his chair with a smile.

"Hasn't it struck you that you should have chosen a wife with money?"

"Now," said Bland rather sternly, "I don't want to lie open to any misconception, but I understood that Mrs. Marston had some means. I'm quite prepared to hear they're small."

"That's fortunate, because it may save you a shock. Sylvia owns a farm in Canada, which did not repay the cost of working it last year. During the present one there has been an improvement, and we expect a small surplus on the two years' operations. The place has been valued at — but perhaps I had better give you a few figures, showing you how matters stand."

Opening a drawer, he handed a paper to Bland, who studied it with a sense of dismay.

"I'll confess that this is an unpleasant surprise," he said at length; and then, while Herbert waited, he pulled himself together with a laugh. "After that admission, I must add that the mistake is the result of my having a sanguine imagination; Sylvia scarcely mentioned her Canadian property. Now, however, there's only one thing to be done — to face the situation as cheerfully as possible."

"It can't be an altogether attractive one." Herbert admired his courage and the attitude he had adopted.

"I shall certainly have to economize," Bland admitted; "and that is a thing I'm not accustomed to; but I may get some appointment, and by and by a small share in some family property will revert to me. Though I must go straight back to my garrison duties now, I'll come down for an hour or two and explain things to Sylvia, as soon as I can." He paused and broke into a faint smile. "I dare say the surprise will be mutual; she may have believed my means to be larger than they are."

"I should consider it very possible," replied Herbert dryly. "As I must see Sylvia, I'll give her an idea how matters stand and clear the ground for you."

Bland said that he would be glad of this; and after some further conversation he took his leave and walked to the station, disturbed in mind, but conscious of a little ironical amusement. There was no doubt that Sylvia had cleverly deluded him, but he admitted that he had done much the same thing to her. Had he realized the true state of her affairs at the beginning he would have withdrawn; but he had no thought of

doing so now. It was obvious that Sylvia's principles were not very high, and he regretted it, although he could not claim much superiority in this respect. He was tolerant and, after all, she had a charm that atoned for many failings.

It was three or four days later when he arrived at Mrs. Kettering's house one evening and found Sylvia awaiting him in a room reserved for her hostess's use. She was very becomingly dressed and looked, he thought, even more attractive than usual. She submitted to his caress with an air of resignation, but he augured a good deal from the fact that she did not repulse him. As it happened, Sylvia had carefully thought over the situation.

"Sit down," she said; "I want to talk with you."

"I think I'll stand. It's more difficult to feel penitent in a comfortable position. It looks as if you had seen Herbert Lansing."

"I have." Sylvia's tone was harsh. "What have you to say for yourself?"

"Not a great deal, which is fortunate, because I haven't much time to say it in," Bland told her with a smile. "To begin with, I'll state the unflattering truth — it strikes me that, in one way, we're each as bad as the other. I suppose it's one of my privileges to mention such facts to you, though I'd never think of admitting them to anybody else."

"It's a husband's privilege," Sylvia rejoined pointedly. "Don't be premature."

"Well," said Bland, "I can only make one defense, but I think you ought to realize how strong it is. We were thrown into each other's society, and it isn't in the least surprising that I lost my head and was carried

away. My power of reasoning went when I fell in love with you."

"That sounds pretty, but it's unfortunate you didn't think of me a little more," pouted Sylvia.

"Think of you?" Bland broke out. "I thought of nothing else!"

"Then it wasn't to much purpose. Don't you see what you want to bring me to? Can't you realize what I should have to give up? How could we ever manage on the little we have?"

The man frowned. He was sorry for her and somewhat ashamed, but she jarred on him in her present mood.

"I believe people who were sufficiently fond of each other have often got along pretty satisfactorily on less, even in the Service. It's a matter of keen regret to me that you will have to make a sacrifice, but things are not quite so bad as they look, and there's reason for believing they may get better. You will have as pleasant society as you enjoy now; my friends will stand by my wife." A look of pride crept into his face. "I dare say they have their failings, but they'll only expect charm from you, and you can give it to them. They won't value you by the display you make or your possessions. We're free from that taint."

"But have you considered what you must give up?"

Bland had hardly expected this, but he smiled.

"Oh, yes. I spent an evening over it and I was a little surprised to find how many things there were I could readily do without. In fact, it was a most instructive evening. The next day I wrote a bundle of letters, resigning from clubs I rarely went to, and canceling orders for odds and ends I hadn't the least

real use for. But I'll confess that I've derived a good deal more pleasure from thinking of how much I shall get."

Sylvia was touched, but she did not mean to yield too readily.

"It would be dreadfully imprudent."

"Just so; one has often to take a risk. It's rather exciting to fling prudence overboard. I want to fix my whole attention on the fact that we love each other!" Bland glanced at his watch. "Now it strikes me that we have been sufficiently practical, and as I must start back to-night, I haven't much time left. Don't you think it would be a pity to waste it?"

He drew her down beside him on a lounge and Sylvia surrendered. After all, the man had made a good defense and, as far as her nature permitted, she had grown fond of him.

CHAPTER XXXIII

GEORGE MAKES UP HIS MIND

DUSK was closing in when George and Edgar alighted at a little English station. Casting an eager glance about, George was disappointed to see nobody from his cousin's house waiting to meet him. In another moment, however, he was warmly greeted by Ethel West.

"A very hearty welcome, George," she said. "You're looking very fit, but thinner than you were when you left us. Stephen's waiting outside. He told Muriel we would drive you over; Herbert's away somewhere."

"How's everybody?" George inquired.

"Sylvia looked as charming as ever when I last saw her a few days ago," Ethel answered with a smile, which George was too eager to notice was somewhat forced. "The rest of us are much as usual. But come along; we'll send over afterward for your heavy things."

They turned toward the outlet, and found Stephen having some trouble with a horse that was startled by the roar of steam. Edgar got up in front of the high trap, George helped Ethel to the seat behind, and they set off the next moment, flying down the wet road amid a cheerful hammer of hoofs and a rattle of wheels. For the first few minutes George said little

as he looked about. On one side great oaks and ashes raised their naked boughs in sharp tracery against the pale saffron glow in the western sky. Ahead, across a deep valley, which was streaked with trains of mist, wide moors and hills rolled away, gray and darkly blue. Down the long slope to the hollow ran small fields with great trees breaking the lines of hedgerows; and the brawling of a river swollen by recent rain came sharply up to him.

It was all good to look upon, a beautiful, well-cared-for land, and he felt a thrill of pride and satisfaction. This was home, and he had come back to it with his work done. A roseate future stretched away before him, its peaceful duties brightened by love, and the contrast between it and the stress and struggle of the past two years added to its charm. Still, to his astonishment, he thought of the sterner and more strenuous life he had led on the western plains with a faint, half-tender regret.

By and by Edgar's laugh rang out.

"The change in my brother is remarkable," Ethel declared. "It was a very happy thought that made us let him go with you."

"I'm not responsible," George rejoined. "You have the country to thank. In some way, it's a hard land; but it's a good one."

"Perhaps something is due to Miss Taunton's influence."

Edgar leaned over the back of the seat.

"That," he said, "is a subject of which I've a monopoly; and I've volumes to say upon it as soon as there's a chance of doing it justice. George, I hear that Singleton, who told us about the wheat, is home

on a visit. Stephen has asked him over; you must meet him."

George said he would be glad to do so, and turned to Ethel when Edgar resumed his conversation with his brother.

"I wired Herbert to have everything ready at my place, though I shall spend the night at Brantholme."

"The Lodge is let. Didn't you know?"

"I understood that the man's tenancy ran out a few weeks ago."

"He renewed it. Herbert didn't know you were coming over; the terms were good."

"Then I'm homeless for a time."

"Oh, no!" said Ethel. "Stephen wanted me to insist on your coming with us now, but I know you will want to see Muriel and have a talk with her. However, we'll expect you to come and take up your quarters with us to-morrow."

George looked at her in some surprise.

"I'd be delighted, but Herbert will expect me to stay with him, and, of course —"

"Sylvia hadn't arrived this afternoon; she was at Mrs. Kettering's," Ethel told him. "But remember that you must stay with us until you make your arrangements. We should find it hard to forgive you if you went to anybody else."

"I wouldn't think of it, only that Herbert's the obvious person to entertain me," George replied, though he was a little puzzled by the insistence, and Ethel abruptly began to talk of something else.

Darkness came, but there were gleams of cheerful light from roadside cottages, and George found the fresh moist air and the shadowy woods they skirted

pleasantly familiar. This was the quiet English countryside he loved, and a sense of deep and tranquil content possessed him. He failed to notice that Ethel cleverly avoided answering some of his questions and talked rather more than usual about matters of small importance. At length they reached the Brantholme gates, and Stephen looked down as George alighted.

"We'll expect you over shortly; I'll send for your baggage," he said as he drove off.

George, to his keen disappointment, found only Mrs. Lansing waiting for him in the hall, though she received him very cordially.

"Herbert had to go up to London; he didn't get your wire in time to put off the journey," she explained. "I'm sorry he can't be back for a few days."

"It doesn't matter; he has to attend to his business," George rejoined. "But where's Sylvia?"

"She hasn't come back from Susan's," said Mrs. Lansing, quickly changing the subject and explaining why Herbert had re-let the Lodge. After that, she asked George questions until she sent him off to prepare for dinner.

George was perplexed as well as disappointed. Neither Ethel nor Muriel seemed inclined to speak about Sylvia — it looked as if they had some reason for avoiding any reference to her; but he assured himself that this was imagination, and during dinner he confined his inquiries to other friends. When it was over and Muriel led him into the drawing-room, his uneasiness grew more keen.

"Herbert thought you would like to know as soon as possible how things were going," Muriel said, as she took a big envelope from a drawer and gave it to him.

"He told me this was a rough statement of your business affairs."

"Thanks," said George, thrusting it carelessly into his pocket. "I must study it sometime. But I've been looking forward all day to meeting Sylvia. Wouldn't Susan let her come?"

Mrs. Lansing hesitated, and then, leaning forward, laid her hand on his arm.

"I've kept it back a little, George; but you must be told. I'm afraid it will be a shock — Sylvia is to marry Captain Bland in the next few weeks."

George rose and turned rather gray in the face, as he leaned on the back of a chair.

"I suppose," he said hoarsely, "there's no doubt of this?"

"It's all arranged." Mrs. Lansing made a compassionate gesture. "I can't tell you how sorry I am, or how hateful it was to have to give you such news."

"I can understand why Sylvia preferred to leave it to you," he said slowly. "How long has this matter been going on?"

Mrs. Lansing's eyes sparkled with anger.

"I believe it began soon after you left. I don't know whether Sylvia expects me to make excuses for her, but I won't do anything of the kind; there are none that could be made. She has behaved shamefully!"

"One must be just," George said with an effort. "After all, she promised me nothing."

"Perhaps not in so many words. But she knew what you expected, and I have no doubt she led you to believe —"

George raised his hand.

"I think there's nothing to be said — the thing must be faced somehow. I feel rather badly hit; you won't mind if I go out and walk about a little?"

Mrs. Lansing was glad to let him go; the sight of his hard-set face hurt her. In another minute he was walking up and down the terrace, but he stopped presently and leaned on the low wall. Hitherto he had believed in Sylvia with an unshaken faith, but now a flood of suspicion poured in on him; above all, there was the telling fact that as soon as he had gone, she had begun to lead on his rival. The shock he had suffered had brought George illumination. Sylvia could never have had an atom of affection for him; she had merely made his loyalty serve her turn. She had done so even before she married Dick Marston; though he had somehow retained his confidence in her then. He had been a fool from the beginning!

The intense bitterness of which he was conscious was wholly new to him, but it was comprehensible. Just in all his dealings, he expected honesty from others, and, though generous in many ways, he had not Bland's tolerant nature; he looked for more than the latter and had less charity. There was a vein of hardness in the man who had loved Sylvia largely because he believed in her. Trickery and falseness were abhorrent to him, and now the woman he had worshiped stood revealed in her deterrent reality.

After a while he pulled himself together, and, going back to the house, entered Herbert's library where, less because of his interest in the matter than as a relief from painful thoughts, he opened the envelope given him and took out the statement. For a few moments the figures puzzled him, and then he broke into

a bitter laugh. The money that he had entrusted to his cousin's care had melted away.

During the next two or three minutes he leaned back, motionless, in his chair; then he took up a pencil and lighted a cigar. Since he was ruined, he might as well ascertain how it had happened, and two facts became obvious from his study of the document: Herbert had sold sound securities, and had mortgaged land; and then placed the proceeds in rubber shares. This was perhaps permissible, but it did not explain what had induced an astute business man to hold the shares until they had fallen to their remarkably low value. There was a mystery here, and George in his present mood was keenly suspicious. He had no doubt that Herbert had left the statement because it would save him the unpleasantness of giving a personal explanation; moreover, George believed that he had left home with that purpose. Then he made a few rough calculations, which seemed to prove that enough remained to buy and stock a farm in western Canada. This was something, though it did not strike him as a matter of much consequence, and he listlessly smoked out his cigar. Then he rose and rejoined Mrs. Lansing.

"If you don't mind, I'll go over to Wests' to-morrow," he said. "They pressed me to spend some time with them, and there are arrangements to be made on which they want my opinion. Edgar is taking up land in Canada."

Mrs. Lansing looked troubled.

"Was there anything disturbing in the paper Herbert gave me for you? He doesn't tell me much about his business, but I gathered that he was vexed about

some shares he bought on your account. I should be sorry if they have gone down."

"You would hardly understand; the thing's a little complicated," George said with reassuring gentleness. "I'm afraid I have lost some money; but, after all, it isn't my worst misfortune. I'll have a talk with Herbert as soon as he comes home."

He left Brantholme the next morning and was received by Ethel when he arrived at Wests'.

"We have been expecting you," she said cordially.

"Then you know?"

"Yes. I'm very sorry; but I suppose it will hardly bear talking about. Stephen is waiting for you; he's taking a day off and Edgar's friend, Singleton, arrives to-night."

Singleton duly made his appearance, but he was not present when George and Stephen West sat down for a talk after dinner in the latter's smoking-room. Presently George took out the statement and handed it to his host.

"I want advice badly and I can't go to an outsider for it," he said. "I feel quite safe in confiding in you."

West studied the document for a while before he looked up.

"The main point to be decided is — whether you should sell these shares at once for what they will bring, or wait a little? With your permission, we'll ask Singleton; he knows more about the matter than anybody else."

Singleton came in and lighted a cigar, and then listened carefully, with a curious little smile, while West supplied a few explanations.

"Hold on to these shares, even if you have to make a sacrifice to do so," he advised.

"But they seem to be almost worthless," George objected.

"Perhaps I had better go into the matter fully," said Singleton. "I'll do so on the understanding that what I'm about to tell you reaches nobody else."

George looked at West, who nodded.

"Well," explained Singleton, "I've come over on a flying visit about this rubber business. The original company — the one in which you hold shares — was got up mainly with the idea of profiting by the rather reckless general buying of such stock. Its tropical possessions were badly managed, though a little good rubber was shipped, and when prices reached their highest point Mr. Lansing sold out."

"If he had sold my shares at the same time, there should have been a satisfactory margin?"

"Undoubtedly. Extensive selling, however, shakes the confidence of speculators, and a man desirous of unloading would accordingly prefer everybody else to hold on."

"I think I am beginning to understand now," George said grimly.

"Then," Singleton went on, "a new company was projected by the promoters of the first one, and I was sent out to report on its prospects. At the last moment Mr. Lansing withdrew, but his associates sent me south again. The slump he had foreseen came; nobody wanted rubber shares in any but firmly established and prosperous companies. Lansing had cleared out in time and left his colleagues to face a crushing loss."

"I don't see how all this bears upon the subject," George interrupted.

"Wait. You may be thankful Lansing didn't sell your shares. I found that the company could be placed upon a paying basis, and, what is more, that the older one possessed resources its promoters had never suspected. In fact, I discovered how its output could be greatly increased at an insignificant cost. I came home at once with a scheme which has been adopted, and I've every reason to believe that there will be marked rise in the shares before long. Anyway, there's no doubt that the company will be able to place high-class rubber on the market at a cost which will leave a very satisfactory margin."

George was conscious of strong relief. It looked as if his loss would be small, and there was a chance of his stock becoming valuable; but another thought struck him.

"When was it that Herbert sold his shares?"

"At the beginning of last winter."

"Shortly before we mentioned that you might come home," West interposed pointedly.

This confirmed George's suspicions; he could readily understand Herbert's preferring that he should stay away, but he remembered that it was Sylvia's letter which had decided him to remain in Canada. In the statement left him, he had been charged with half of certain loans Herbert had made to her, and he wondered whether this pointed to some collusion between them. He thought it by no means improbable.

"I understand that Herbert knows nothing about these new developments, and has no idea that the future of the two undertakings is promising?" he said.

Singleton laughed.

"Not the slightest notion. If he suspected it, there would be nothing to prevent his buying shares; nothing will transpire until the shareholders' meeting, which will not be held for some time. Lansing retired and sold out, because he was convinced that both companies were worthless." He paused and added dryly: "I can't see why we should enlighten him."

"Nor can I," responded George; and West nodded.

"Then," said Singleton, "when Lansing learns the truth, it will be too late for him to profit by the knowledge. I believe he has thrown away the best chance he ever had."

Shortly afterward Edgar came in and they talked of something else; but two days later Herbert returned and George went over to Brantholme. He was shown into the library where Herbert was sitting, and the latter was on his guard when he saw his cousin's face. He greeted him affably, however, and made a few inquiries about his farming.

George stood looking at him with a fixed expression.

"I think," he said shortly, "we had better talk business."

"Oh, well," replied Herbert. "I suppose you have studied my statement. I needn't say that I regret the way matters have turned out; but one can't foresee every turn of the market, or avoid a miscalculation now and then. It would hurt me if I thought this thing had anything to do with your going to Stephen's."

"We won't discuss that. I gave you authority to look after my affairs; I want it back."

Herbert took a document from a drawer and laid it on the table.

"Here it is. But won't you let me try to straighten matters out?"

"Can they be straightened out?"

"Well," said Herbert with some embarrassment, "I'm afraid there's a serious loss, but it would be wiser to face it and sell off the shares."

"I can do what seems most desirable without any further assistance."

George leaned forward and, as he picked up the document, a flush crept into his cousin's face.

"I hardly expected you would take this line. Do you think it's right to blame me because I couldn't anticipate the fall in value?"

"It strikes me that the situation is one that had better not be discussed between us," George rejoined, with marked coldness. "Besides, my opinion won't count for much in face of the very satisfactory financial results you have secured. I'm sorry for what has happened, on Muriel's account."

He turned and went out; and met Ethel on reaching West's house.

"I must try to arrange for an interview with Sylvia and Captain Bland," he told her. "There are matters that should be explained to them."

"Won't it be painful?"

"That can't be allowed to count."

"After all," said Ethel thoughtfully, "it's no doubt the proper course."

A week later he visited Mrs. Kettering's, and was shown into a room where Sylvia awaited him alone. After the first glance at him, she turned her eyes away.

"George," she said, "I'm afraid I've behaved badly. Can you forgive me?"

"I think so," he answered with a forced smile. "Anyway, I'll try, and I'd like you to be happy. But it wouldn't be flattering if I pretended that I wasn't hurt."

"Ah," she exclaimed, "you were always so generous!"

He stood silent a moment or two looking at her. She had cunningly tricked him and killed his love; but she was very attractive with her pretty, helpless air. He knew this was false, but there was no profit in bitterness; he would not cause her pain.

"It's more to the purpose that I'm hard, which is fortunate in several ways. But I came to talk about the farm; that is why I suggested that Captain Bland should be present."

"The farm?" Sylvia regarded him with a trace of mockery. "That you should think of it is so characteristic of you!"

George smiled.

"I can't help my matter-of-fact nature, and I've found it serviceable. Anyway, the farm must be thought of." He laid a hand gently on her shoulder. "Sylvia, I'm told that Bland isn't rich. If he loves you, take him fully into your confidence."

She blushed, which he had scarcely expected.

"I have done so — at least, I allowed Herbert to explain — there is nothing hidden." Then her tone changed to one of light raillery. "You were always an extremist, George; you can't hit the happy medium. Once you believed I was everything that was most admirable, and now —"

"I think you have done right and wisely in letting Bland know how things stand. It was only my interest in your future that warranted what I said."

"Well," she replied, "we will go up and talk to him; he's waiting. You can give your account to him."

George followed her, but for a while he was conscious of a certain restraint, which he fancied was shared by Bland. It was difficult to talk about indifferent subjects, and he took out some papers.

"I came to explain the state of Sylvia's Canadian affairs; she wished you to know," he said. "If you will give me a few minutes, I'll try to make things clear."

Bland listened gravely, and then made a sign of satisfaction.

"It's obvious that Sylvia placed her property in most capable hands. We can only give you our sincere thanks."

"There's a point to be considered," George resumed. "Have you decided what to do with the property?"

"Sylvia and I have talked it over; we thought of selling. I don't see how we could carry on the farm."

"If you will let the matter stand over for a few weeks, I might be a purchaser. The land's poor, but there's a good deal of it, and I believe that, with proper treatment, it could be made to pay."

Sylvia looked astonished, Bland slightly embarrassed.

"We never contemplated your buying the place," he said.

"I've grown fond of it; I believe I understand how

it should be worked. There's no reason why either of you should object to my becoming a purchaser."

"I suppose that's true," Bland agreed. "Anyway, I can promise that we'll do nothing about the matter until we hear from you; I don't think there's any likelihood of our disputing about the price. You can fix that at what it's worth to you."

George changed the subject; and when he went out, Sylvia smiled at Bland.

"You needn't have been so sensitive about his buying the farm," she said. "It will have to be sold."

"I suppose so, but I wish we could have given it to him."

Sylvia touched his cheek caressingly.

"Don't be foolish; it's out of the question. You will have to be economical enough as it is, but you shan't make any sacrifice that isn't strictly necessary."

During the next few weeks George made some visits among his friends, but he returned to the Wests shortly before Edgar sailed for Canada. On the night preceding his departure they were sitting together when Edgar looked at him thoughtfully.

"George," he remarked, "I wonder if it has ever struck you that you're a very short-sighted person? I mean that you don't realize where your interest lies."

"It's possible," said George. "What particular oversight are you referring to?"

"It isn't easy to answer bluntly, and if I threw out any delicate suggestions, they'd probably be wasted. You saw a good deal of Flora Grant, and if you had any sense you would have recognized what kind of girl she is."

"Miss Grant doesn't need your praise."

"I'm glad you admit it; appreciation's sometimes mutual. Now I can't undertake to say what Flora implied from your visits, but I've no doubt about what her father expected."

The blood crept into George's face as he remembered Grant's manner during their last interview.

"I did nothing that could have led him to believe —"

"Oh, no!" said Edgar. "You behaved with the greatest prudence; perhaps frigid insensibility would describe it better. Of course this is a deplorable intrusion, but I feel I must point out that it may not be too late yet."

"I've felt greatly tempted to buy Sylvia's farm," George said thoughtfully.

"That's good news. If you're wise, you'll consider what I've said."

George did so after Edgar's departure, though the idea was not new to him. He had long been sensible of Flora's charm, and had now and then felt in Canada that it would not be difficult to love her. Since he had learned the truth about Sylvia, Flora had occupied a prominent place in his mind. By degrees a desire for her had grown stronger; he had seen how admirable in many ways she was, how staunch and fearless and upright. Still, he feared to go back; she was proud and might scorn his tardy affection. He grew disturbed and occasionally moody, and then one day a cablegram was delivered to him.

"*Believe you had better come back,*" it read, and was signed by Helen Taunton.

George understood what it was intended to convey,

and before night he had arranged to purchase Sylvia's farm.

Three days later he was crossing the Atlantic with an eager and thankful heart.

THE END